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AURORA FLOYD.

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AURORA FLOYD.

BY

M. E. BRADDON,

AUTHOR OF "LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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CONTENTS.

CHAPTER I.

PAGE

"LOVE TOOK UP THE GLASS OF TIME, AND TURNED IT IN HIS GLOWING HANDS" . . . 1

CHAPTER II.

MR. PASTERN'S LETTER 22

CHAPTER III.

MR. JAMES CONYERS 40

CHAPTER IV.

THE TRAINER'S MESSENGER 65

CHAPTER V.

OUT IN THE RAIN 89

CHAPTER VI.

MONEY MATTERS 124

CHAPTER VII.

CAPTAIN PRODDER 162

CHAPTER VIII.

"HE ONLY SAID, I AM A-WEARY" 184

CHAPTER IX.

PAGE

STILL CONSTANT 205

CHAPTER X.

ON THE THRESHOLD OF DARKER MISERIES . . 241

CHAPTER XI.

CAPTAIN PRODDER CARRIES BAD NEWS TO HIS NIECE'S HOUSE 255

CHAPTER XII.

THE DEED THAT HAD BEEN DONE IN THE WOOD . 283

AURORA FLOYD.

CHAPTER I.

"LOVE TOOK UP THE GLASS OF TIME, AND TURNED IT IN HIS GLOWING HANDS."

Talbot Bulstrode yielded at last to John's repeated invitations, and consented to pass a couple of days at Mellish Park.

He despised and hated himself for the absurd concession. In what a pitiful farce had the tragedy ended! A visitor in the house of his rival. A calm spectator of Aurora's every-day, commonplace happiness. For the space of two days he had consented to occupy this most preposterous position. Two days only; then back to the Cornish miners, and the desolate bachelor's lodgings in Queen's Square, Westminster; back to his tent in life's Great Sahara. He could not for the very

soul of him resist the temptation of beholding the inner life of that Yorkshire mansion. He wanted to know for certain—what was it to him, I wonder? —whether she was really happy, and had utterly forgotten him. They all returned to the Park together, Aurora, John, Archibald Floyd, Lucy, Talbot Bulstrode, and Captain Hunter. The last-named officer was a jovial gentleman, with a hook nose and auburn whiskers; a gentleman whose intellectual attainments were of no very oppressive order, but a hearty, pleasant guest in an honest country mansion, where there is cheer and welcome for all.

Talbot could but inwardly confess that Aurora became her new position. How everybody loved her! What an atmosphere of happiness she created about her wherever she went! How joyously the dogs barked and leapt at sight of her, straining their chains in the desperate effort to approach her! How fearlessly the thorough-bred mares and foals ran to the paddock-gates to bid her welcome, bending down their velvet nostrils to nestle upon her shoulder, responsive to the touch of her caressing hand! Seeing all this, how could Talbot refrain from remembering that this same

sunlight might have shone upon that dreary castle far away by the surging western sea? She might have been his, this beautiful creature; but at what price? At the price of honour; at the price of every principle of his mind, which had set up for himself a holy and perfect standard—a pure and spotless ideal for the wife of his choice. Forbid it, manhood! He might have weakly yielded; he might have been happy, with the blind happiness of a lotus-eater, but not the reasonable bliss of a Christian. Thank Heaven for the strength which had been given to him to escape from the silken net! Thank Heaven for the power which had been granted to him to fight the battle!

Standing by Aurora's side in one of the wide windows of Mellish Park, looking far out over the belted lawn to the glades in which the deer lay basking drowsily in the April sunlight, he could not repress the thought uppermost in his mind.

"I am—very glad—to see you so happy, Mrs. Mellish."

She looked at him with frank, truthful eyes, in whose brightness there was not one latent shadow.

"Yes," she said, "I am very, very happy.

My husband is very good to me. He loves—and trusts me."

She could not resist that one little stab—the only vengeance she ever took upon him; but a stroke that pierced him to the heart.

"Aurora! Aurora! Aurora!" he cried.

That half-stifled cry revealed the secret of wounds that were not yet healed. Mrs. Mellish turned pale at the traitorous sound. This man must be cured. The happy wife, secure in her own stronghold of love and confidence, could not bear to see this poor fellow still adrift.

She by no means despaired of his cure, for experience had taught her, that although love's passionate fever takes several forms, there are very few of them incurable. Had she not passed safely through the ordeal herself, without one scar to bear witness of the old wounds?

She left Captain Bulstrode staring moodily out of the window, and went away to plan the saving of this poor shipwrecked soul.

She ran in the first place to tell Mr. John Mellish of her discovery, as it was her custom to carry to him every scrap of intelligence great and small.

"My dearest old Jack," she said—it was another of her customs to address him by every species of exaggeratedly endearing appellation; it may be that she did this for the quieting of her own conscience, being well aware that she tyrannized over him—"my darling boy, I have made a discovery."

"About the filly?"

"About Talbot Bulstrode."

John's blue eyes twinkled maliciously. He was evidently half prepared for what was coming.

"What is it, Lolly?"

Lolly was a corruption of Aurora, devised by John Mellish.

"Why, I'm really afraid, my precious darling, that he hasn't quite got over——"

"My taking you away from him!" roared John. "I thought as much. Poor devil—poor Talbot! I could see that he would have liked to fight me on the stand at York. Upon my word, I pity him!" and in token of his compassion Mr. Mellish burst into that old joyous, boisterous, but musical laugh, which Talbot might almost have heard at the other end of the house.

This was a favourite delusion of John's. He

firmly believed that he had won Aurora's affection in fair competition with Captain Bulstrode; pleasantly ignoring that the captain had resigned all pretensions to Miss Floyd's hand nine or ten months before his own offer had been accepted.

The genial, sanguine creature had a habit of deceiving himself in this manner. He saw all things in the universe just as he wished to see them; all men and women good and honest; life one long, pleasant voyage in a well-fitted ship, with only first-class passengers on board. He was one of those men who are likely to cut their throats or take prussic acid upon the day they first encounter the black visage of Care.

"And what are we to do with this poor fellow, Lolly?"

"Marry him!" exclaimed Mrs. Mellish.

"Both of us?" said John simply.

"My dearest pet, what an obtuse old darling you are! No; marry him to Lucy Floyd, my first cousin once removed, and keep the Bulstrode estate in the family."

"Marry him to Lucy!"

"Yes; why not? She has studied enough, and learnt history, and geography, and astronomy, and

botany, and geology, and conchology, and entomology enough; and she has covered I don't know how many China jars with impossible birds and flowers; and she has illuminated missals, and read High-Church novels. So the next best thing she can do is to marry Talbot Bulstrode."

John had his own reasons for agreeing with Aurora in this matter. He remembered that secret of poor Lucy's, which he had discovered more than a year before at Felden Woods: the secret which had been revealed to him by some mysterious sympathetic power belonging to hopeless love. So Mr. Mellish declared his hearty concurrence in Aurora's scheme, and the two amateur match-makers set to work to devise a complicated man-trap, in the which Talbot was to be entangled; never for a moment imagining that, while they were racking their brains in the endeavour to bring this piece of machinery to perfection, the intended victim was quietly strolling across the sunlit lawn towards the very fate they desired for him.

Yes, Talbot Bulstrode lounged with languid step to meet his Destiny, in a wood upon the borders of the Park; a part of the Park, indeed, inasmuch

as it was within the boundary-fence of John's domain. The wood-anemones trembled in the spring breezes, deep in those shadowy arcades; pale primroses showed their mild faces amid their sheltering leaves; and in shady nooks, beneath low-spreading boughs of elm and beech, oak and ash, the violets hid their purple beauty from the vulgar eye. A lovely spot, soothing by its harmonious influence; a very forest sanctuary, without whose dim arcades man cast his burden down, to enter in a child. Captain Bulstrode had felt in no very pleasant humour as he walked across the lawn; but some softening influence stole upon him, on the threshold of that sylvan shelter, which made him feel a better man. He began to question himself as to how he was playing his part in the great drama of life.

"Good heavens!" he thought, "what a shameful coward, what a negative wretch, I have become by this one grief of my manhood! An indifferent son, a careless brother, a useless, purposeless creature, content to dawdle away my life in feeble pottering with political economy. Shall I ever be in earnest again? Is this dreary doubt of every living creature to go with me to my grave? Less

than two years ago my heart sickened at the thought that I had lived to two-and-thirty years of age, and had never been loved. Since then—since then—since then I had lived through life's brief fever; I have fought manhood's worst and sharpest battle, and find myself—where? Exactly where I was before; still companionless upon the dreary journey; only a little nearer to the end."

He walked slowly onward into the woodland aisle, other aisles branching away from him right and left into deep glades and darkening shadow. A month or so later, and the mossy ground beneath his feet would be one purple carpet of hyacinths, the very air thick with a fatal-scented vapour from the perfumed bulbs.

"I asked too much," said Talbot, in that voiceless argument we are perpetually carrying on with ourselves; "I asked too much; I yielded to the spell of the siren, and was angry because I missed the white wings of the angel. I was bewitched by the fascinations of a beautiful woman, when I should have sought for a noble-minded wife."

He went deeper and deeper into the wood, going to his fate, as another man was to do before the coming summer was over; but to what a different

fate! The long arcades of beech and elm had reminded him from the first of the solemn aisles of a cathedral. The saint was only needed. And coming suddenly to a spot where a new arcade branched off abruptly on his right hand, he saw, in one of the sylvan niches, as fair a saint as had ever been modelled by the hand of artist and believer,—the same golden-haired angel he had seen in the long drawing-room at Felden Woods,—Lucy Floyd, with the pale aureola about her head, her large straw-hat in her lap filled with anemones and violets, and the third volume of a novel in her hand.

How much in life often hangs, or seems to us to hang, upon what is called by playwrights, "a situation!" But for this sudden encounter, but for thus coming upon this pretty picture, Talbot Bulstrode might have dropped into his grave ignorant to the last of Lucy's love for him. But, given a sunshiny April morning (April's fairest bloom, remember, when the capricious nymph is mending her manners, aware that her lovelier sister May is at hand, and anxious to make a good impression before she drops her farewell curtsy, and weeps her last brief shower of farewell tears)—given a

balmy spring morning, solitude, a wood, wild-flowers, golden hair and blue eyes, and is the result difficult to arrive at?

Talbot Bulstrode, leaning against the broad trunk of a beech, looked down at the fair face, which crimsoned under his eyes; and the first glimmering hint of Lucy's secret began to dawn upon him. At that moment he had no thought of profiting by the discovery, no thought of what he was afterwards led on to say. His mind was filled with the storm of emotion that had burst from him in that wild cry to Aurora. Rage and jealousy, regret, despair, envy, love, and hate,—all the conflicting feelings that had struggled like so many demons in his soul at sight of Aurora's happiness, were still striving for mastery in his breast; and the first words he spoke revealed the thoughts that were uppermost.

"Your cousin is very happy in her new life, Miss Floyd?" he said.

Lucy looked up at him with surprise. It was the first time he had spoken to her of Aurora.

"Yes," she answered quietly, "I think she is happy."

Captain Bulstrode whisked the end of his cane

across a group of anemones, and decapitated the tremulous blossoms. He was thinking, rather savagely, what a shame it was that this glorious Aurora could be happy with big, broad-shouldered, jovial-tempered John Mellish. He could not understand the strange anomaly; he could not discover the clue to the secret; he could not comprehend that the devoted love of this sturdy Yorkshireman was in itself strong enough to conquer all difficulties, to outweigh all differences.

Little by little, he and Lucy began to talk of Aurora, until Miss Floyd told her companion all about that dreary time at Felden Woods, during which the life of the heiress was well-nigh despaired of. So she had loved him truly, then, after all; she had loved, and had suffered, and had lived down her trouble, and had forgotten him, and was happy. The story was all told in that one sentence. He looked blankly back at the irrecoverable past, and was angry with the pride of the Bulstrodes, which had stood between himself and his happiness.

He told sympathizing Lucy something of his sorrow; told her that misapprehension—mistaken pride—had parted him from Aurora. She tried,

in her gentle, innocent fashion, to comfort the strong man in his weakness, and in trying revealed—ah, how simply and transparently!—the old secret, which had so long been hidden from him.

Heaven help the man whose heart is caught at the rebound by a fair-haired divinity, with dove-like eyes, and a low tremulous voice softly attuned to his grief. Talbot Bulstrode saw that he was beloved; and, in very gratitude, made a dismal offer of the ashes of that fire which had burnt so fiercely at Aurora's shrine. Do not despise this poor Lucy if she accepted her cousin's forgotten lover with humble thankfulness; nay, with a tumult of wild delight, and with joyful fear and trembling. She loved him so well, and had loved him so long. Forgive and pity her, for she was one of those pure and innocent creatures whose whole being resolves itself into *affection;* to whom passion, anger, and pride are unknown; who live only to love, and who love until death. Talbot Bulstrode told Lucy Floyd that he had loved Aurora with the whole strength of his soul, but that, now the battle was over, he, the stricken warrior, needed a consoler for his declining days:

would she, could she, give her hand to one who would strive to the uttermost to fulfil a husband's duty, and to make her happy? Happy! She would have been happy if he had asked her to be his slave; happy if she could have been a scullery-maid at Bulstrode Castle, so that she might have seen the dark face she loved once or twice a day through the obscure panes of some kitchen window.

But she was the most undemonstrative of women, and, except by her blushes, and her drooping eyelids, and the tear-drop trembling upon the soft auburn lashes, she made no reply to the captain's appeal, until at last, taking her hand in his, he won from her a low-consenting murmur which meant Yes.

Good heavens! how hard it is upon such women as these that they feel so much and yet display so little feeling! The dark-eyed, impetuous creatures, who speak out fearlessly, and tell you that they love or hate you—flinging their arms round your neck or throwing the carving-knife at you, as the case may be—get full value for all their emotion; but these gentle creatures love, and make no sign. They sit, like Patience on a monument,

smiling at grief; and no one reads the mournful meaning of that sad smile. Concealment, like the worm i' the bud, feeds on their damask cheeks; and compassionate relatives tell them that they are bilious, and recommend some homely remedy for their pallid complexions. They are always at a disadvantage. Their inner life may be a tragedy, all blood and tears, while their outer existence is some dull domestic drama of every-day life. The only outward sign Lucy Floyd gave of the condition of her heart was that one tremulous, half-whispered affirmative; and yet what a tempest of emotion was going forward within! The muslin folds of her dress rose and fell with the surging billows; but, for the very life of her, she could have uttered no better response to Talbot's pleading.

It was only by-and-by, after she and Captain Bulstrode had wandered slowly back to the house, that her emotion betrayed itself. Aurora met her cousin in the corridor out of which their rooms opened, and, drawing Lucy into her own dressing-room, asked the truant where she had been.

"Where have you been, you runaway girl? John and I have wanted you half a dozen times."

Miss Lucy Floyd explained that she had been in the wood with the last new novel,—a High-Church novel, in which the heroine rejected the clerical hero because he did not perform the service according to the Rubric. Now Miss Lucy Floyd made this admission with so much confusion and so many blushes, that it would have appeared as if there were some lurking criminality in the fact of spending an April morning in a wood; and being further examined as to why she had stayed so long, and whether she had been alone all the time, poor Lucy fell into a pitiful state of embarrassment, declaring that she had been alone; that is to say, part of the time—or at least most of the time; but that Captain Bulstrode——

But in trying to pronounce his name,—this beloved, this sacred name,—Lucy Floyd's utterance failed her; she fairly broke down, and burst into tears.

Aurora laid her cousin's face upon her breast, and looked down, with a womanly, matronly glance, into those tearful blue eyes.

"Lucy, my darling," she said, "is it really and truly as I think—as I wish:—Talbot loves you?"

"He has asked me to marry him," Lucy whispered.

"And you—you have consented—you love him?"

Lucy Floyd only answered by a new burst of tears.

"Why, my darling, how this surprises me! How long has it been so, Lucy? How long have you loved him?"

"From the hour I first saw him," murmured Lucy; "from the day he first came to Felden. O Aurora! I know how foolish and weak it was; I hate myself for the folly; but he is so good, so noble, so——"

"My silly darling; and because he is good and noble, and has asked you to be his wife, you shed as many tears as if you had been asked to go to his funeral. My loving, tender Lucy, you loved him all the time, then; and you were so gentle and good to me—to me, who was selfish enough never to guess——My dearest, you are a hundred times better suited to him than ever I was, and you will be as happy—as happy as I am with that ridiculous old John."

Aurora's eyes filled with tears as she spoke

She was truly and sincerely glad that Talbot was in a fair way to find consolation, still more glad that her sentimental cousin was to be made happy.

Talbot Bulstrode lingered on a few days at Mellish Park;—happy ah! too happy days for Lucy Floyd—and then departed, after receiving the congratulations of John and Aurora.

He was to go straight to Alexander Floyd's villa at Fulham, and plead his cause with Lucy's father. There was little fear of his meeting other than a favourable reception; for Talbot Bulstrode of Bulstrode Castle was a very great match for a daughter of the junior branch of Floyd, Floyd, and Floyd, a young lady whose expectations were considerably qualified by half a dozen brothers and sisters.

So Captain Bulstrode went back to London as the betrothed lover of Lucy Floyd; went back with a subdued gladness in his heart, all unlike the stormy joys of the past. He was happy in the choice he had made calmly and dispassionately. He had loved Aurora for her beauty and her fascination; he was going to marry Lucy because he had seen much of her, had observed her closely, and believed her to be all that a woman should be.

Perhaps, if stern truth must be told, Lucy's chief charm in the captain's eyes lay in that reverence for himself which she so *naïvely* betrayed. He accepted her worship with a quiet, unconscious serenity, and thought her the most sensible of women.

Mrs. Alexander was utterly bewildered when Aurora's sometime lover pleaded for her daughter's hand. She was too busy a mother amongst her little flock to be the most penetrating of observers, and she had never suspected the state of Lucy's heart. She was glad, therefore, to find that her daughter did justice to her excellent education, and had too much good sense to refuse so advantageous an offer as that of Captain Bulstrode; and she joined with her husband in perfect approval of Talbot's suit. So, there being no let or hindrance, and as the lovers had long known and esteemed each other, it was decided, at the captain's request, that the wedding should take place early in June, and that the honeymoon should be spent at Bulstrode Castle.

At the end of May, Mr. and Mrs. Mellish went to Felden, on purpose to attend Lucy's wedding, which took place with great style at Fulham, Archibald Floyd presenting his grand-niece with a

cheque for five thousand pounds after the return from church.

Once during that marriage ceremony Talbot Bulstrode was nigh upon rubbing his eyes, thinking that the pageant must be a dream. A dream surely; for here was a pale, fair-haired girl by his side, while the woman he had chosen two years before stood amidst a group behind him, and looked on at the ceremony, a pleased spectator. But when he felt the little gloved hand trembling upon his arm, as the bride and bridegroom left the altar, he remembered that it was no dream, and that life held new and solemn duties for him from that hour.

Now my two heroines being married, the reader versed in the physiology of novel writing may conclude that my story is done, that the green curtain is ready to fall upon the last act of the play, and that I have nothing more to do than to entreat indulgence for the shortcomings of the performance and the performers. Yet, after all, does the business of the real life-drama always end upon the altar-steps? Must the play needs be over when the hero and heroine have signed their names in the register? Does man cease to

be, to do, and to suffer when he gets married? And is it necessary that the novelist, after devoting three volumes to the description of a courtship of six weeks' duration, should reserve for himself only half a page in which to tell us the events of two-thirds of a lifetime? Aurora is married, and settled, and happy; sheltered, as one would imagine, from all dangers, safe under the wing of her stalwart adorer; but it does not therefore follow that the story of her life is done. She has escaped shipwreck for a while, and has safely landed on a pleasant shore; but the storm may still lower darkly upon the horizon, while the hoarse thunder grumbles threateningly in the distance.

CHAPTER II.

MR. PASTERN'S LETTER.

Mr. John Mellish reserved to himself one room upon the ground-floor of his house: a cheerful, airy apartment, with French windows opening upon the lawn; windows that were sheltered from the sun by a verandah overhung with jessamine and roses. It was altogether a pleasant room for the summer season, the floor being covered with an India matting instead of a carpet, and many of the chairs being made of light basket-work. Over the chimney-piece hung a portrait of John's father, and opposite to this work of art there was the likeness of the deceased gentleman's favourite hunter, surmounted by a pair of brightly polished spurs, the glistening rowels of which had often pierced the sides of that faithful steed. In this chamber Mr. Mellish kept his whips, canes, foils, single-sticks, boxing-gloves, spurs, guns, pistols,

powder and shot flasks, fishing-tackle, boots, and tops; and many happy mornings were spent by the master of Mellish Park in the pleasing occupation of polishing, repairing, inspecting, and otherwise setting in order, these possessions. He had as many pairs of hunting-boots as would have supplied half Leicestershire—with tops to match. He had whips enough for all the Melton Hunt. Surrounded by these treasures, as it were in a temple sacred to the deities of the race-course and the hunting-field, Mr. John Mellish used to hold solemn audiences with his trainer and his head-groom upon the business of the stable.

It was Aurora's custom to peep into this chamber perpetually, very much to the delight and distraction of her adoring husband, who found the black eyes of his divinity a terrible hindrance to business; except, indeed, when he could induce Mrs. Mellish to join in the discussion upon hand, and lend the assistance of her powerful intellect to the little conclave. I believe that John thought she could have handicapped the horses for the Chester Cup as well as Mr. Topham himself. She was such a brilliant creature, that every little smattering of knowledge she possessed

appeared to such good account as to make her seem an adept in any subject of which she spoke; and the simple Yorkshireman believed in her as the wisest as well as the noblest and fairest of women.

Mr. and Mrs. Mellish returned to Yorkshire immediately after Lucy's wedding. Poor John was uneasy about his stables; for his trainer was a victim to chronic rheumatism, and Mr. Pastern had not as yet made any communication respecting the young man of whom he had spoken on the Stand at York.

"I shall keep Langley," John said to Aurora, speaking of his old trainer; "for he's an honest fellow, and his judgment will always be of use to me. He and his wife can still occupy the rooms over the stables; and the new man, whoever he may be, can live in the lodge on the north side of the Park. Nobody ever goes in at that gate; so the lodge-keeper's post is a sinecure, and the cottage has been shut up for the last year or two. I wish John Pastern would write."

"And I wish whatever you wish, my dearest life," Aurora said dutifully to her happy slave.

Very little had been heard of Steeve Hargraves,

the "Softy," since the day upon which John Mellish had turned him neck and crop out of his service. One of the grooms had seen him in a little village close to the Park, and Stephen had informed the man that he was getting his living by doing odd jobs for the doctor of the parish, and looking after that gentleman's horse and gig; but the "Softy" had seemed inclined to be sulky, and had said very little about himself or his sentiments. He made very particular inquiries, though, about Mrs. Mellish, and asked so many questions as to what Aurora did and said, where she went, whom she saw, and how she agreed with her husband, that at last the groom, although only a simple country lad, refused to answer any more interrogatories about his mistress.

Steeve Hargraves rubbed his coarse, sinewy hands, and chuckled as he spoke of Aurora.

"She's a rare proud one,—a regular high-spirited lady," he said, in that whispering voice that always sounded strange. "She laid it on to me with that riding-whip of hers; but I bear no malice—I bear no malice. She's a beautiful creature, and I wish Mr. Mellish joy of his bargain."

The groom scarcely knew how to take this, not being fully aware if it was intended as a compliment or an impertinence. So he nodded to the "Softy," and strode off, leaving him still rubbing his hands and whispering about Aurora Mellish, who had long ago forgotten her encounter with Mr. Stephen Hargraves.

How was it likely that she should remember him, or take heed of him? How was it likely that she should take alarm because the pale-faced widow, Mrs. Walter Powell, sat by her hearth and hated her? Strong in her youth and beauty, rich in her happiness, sheltered and defended by her husband's love, how should she think of danger? How should she dread misfortune? She thanked God every day that the troubles of her youth were past, and that her path in life led henceforth through smooth and pleasant places, where no perils could come.

Lucy was at Bulstrode Castle, winning upon the affections of her husband's mother, who patronized her daughter-in-law with lofty kindness, and took the blushing timorous creature under her sheltering wing. Lady Bulstrode was very well satisfied with her son's choice. He might

have done better, certainly, as to position and fortune, the lady hinted to Talbot; and in her maternal anxiety, she would have preferred his marrying any one rather than the cousin of *that* Miss Floyd who ran away from school, and caused such a scandal at the Parisian seminary. But Lady Bulstrode's heart warmed to Lucy, who was so gentle and humble, and who always spoke of Talbot as if he had been a being far "too bright and good," &c., much to the gratification of her ladyship's maternal vanity.

"She has a very proper affection for you, Talbot," Lady Bulstrode said, "and, for so young a creature, promises to make an excellent wife; far better suited to you, I am sure, than her cousin could ever have been."

Talbot turned fiercely upon his mother, very much to the lady's surprise.

"Why will you be for ever bringing Aurora's name into the question, mother?" he cried. "Why cannot you let her memory rest? You parted us for ever,—you and Constance,—and is not that enough? She is married, and she and her husband are a very happy couple. A man might have a worse wife than Mrs. Mellish, I can

tell you; and John seems to appreciate her value in his rough way."

"You need not be so violent, Talbot," Lady Bulstrode said, with offended dignity. "I am very glad to hear that Miss Floyd has altered since her school-days, and I hope that she may continue to be a good wife," she added, with an emphasis which insinuated that she had no very great hopes of the continuance of Mr. Mellish's happiness.

"My poor mother is offended with me," Talbot thought, as Lady Bulstrode swept out of the room. "I know I am an abominable bear, and that nobody will ever truly love me so long as I live. My poor little Lucy loves me after her fashion; loves me in fear and trembling, as if she and I belonged to different orders of beings; very much as the flying woman must have loved my countryman, Peter Wilkins, I think. But, after all, perhaps my mother is right, and my gentle little wife is better suited to me than Aurora would have been."

So we dismiss Talbot Bulstrode for a while, moderately happy, and yet not quite satisfied. What mortal ever was *quite* satisfied in this world?

It is a part of our earthly nature always to find something wanting, always to have a vague, dull, ignorant yearning which cannot be appeased. Sometimes, indeed, we are happy; but in our wildest happiness we are still unsatisfied, for it seems then as if the cup of joy were too full, and we grow cold with terror at the thought that, even because of its fulness, it may possibly be dashed to the ground. What a mistake this life would be, what a wild feverish dream, what an unfinished and imperfect story, if it were not a prelude to something better! Taken by itself, it is all trouble and confusion; but taking the future as the keynote of the present, how wondrously harmonious the whole becomes! How little does it signify that our joys here are not complete, our wishes not fulfilled, if the completion and the fulfilment are to come hereafter!

Little more than a week after Lucy's wedding, Aurora ordered her horse immediately after breakfast, upon a sunny summer morning, and, accompanied by the old groom who had ridden behind John's father, went out on an excursion amongst the villages round Mellish Park, as it was her habit to do once or twice a week.

The poor in the neighbourhood of the Yorkshire mansion had good reason to bless the coming of the banker's daughter. Aurora loved nothing better than to ride from cottage to cottage, chatting with the simple villagers, and finding out their wants. She never found the worthy creatures very remiss in stating their necessities, and the housekeeper at Mellish Park had enough to do in distributing Aurora's bounties amongst the cottagers who came to the servants' hall with pencil orders from Mrs. Mellish. Mrs. Walter Powell sometimes ventured to take Aurora to task on the folly and sinfulness of what she called indiscriminate almsgiving; but Mrs. Mellish would pour such a flood of eloquence upon her antagonist, that the ensign's widow was always glad to retire from the unequal contest. Nobody had ever been able to argue with Archibald Floyd's daughter. Impulsive and impetuous, she had always taken her own course, whether for weal or woe, and nobody had been strong enough to hinder her.

Returning on this lovely June morning from one of these charitable expeditions, Mrs. Mellish dismounted from her horse at a little turnstile

leading into the wood, and ordered the groom to take the animal home.

"I have a fancy for walking through the wood, Joseph," she said; "it's such a lovely morning. Take care of Mazeppa; and if you see Mr. Mellish, tell him that I shall be home directly."

The man touched his hat, and rode off, leading Aurora's horse.

Mrs. Mellish gathered up the folds of her habit, and strolled slowly into the wood, under whose shadow Talbot Bulstrode and Lucy had wandered on that eventful April day which sealed the young lady's fate.

Now Aurora had chosen to ramble homewards through this wood because, being thoroughly happy, the warm gladness of the summer weather filled her with a sense of delight which she was loth to curtail. The drowsy hum of the insects, the rich colouring of the woods, the scent of wild-flowers, the ripple of water,—all blended into one delicious whole, and made the earth lovely.

There is something satisfactory, too, in the sense of possession; and Aurora felt, as she looked down the long avenues, and away through distant loopholes in the wood to the wide expanse of park

and lawn, and the picturesque, irregular pile of building beyond, half Gothic, half Elizabethan, and so lost in a rich tangle of ivy and bright foliage as to be beautiful at every point,—she felt, I say, that all the fair picture was her own, or her husband's, which was the same thing. She had never for one moment regretted her marriage with John Mellish. She had never, as I have said already, been inconstant to him by one thought.

In one part of the wood the ground rose considerably; so that the house, which lay low, was distinctly visible whenever there was a break in the trees. This rising ground was considered the prettiest spot in the wood, and here a summer-house had been erected: a fragile, wooden building, which had fallen into decay of late years, but which was still a pleasant resting-place upon a summer's day, being furnished with a wooden table and a broad bench, and sheltered from the sun and wind by the lower branches of a magnificent beech. A few paces away from this summer-house there was a pool of water, the surface of which was so covered with lilies and tangled weeds as to have beguiled a short-sighted traveller into forgetfulness of the danger beneath. Aurora's way led her

past this spot, and she started with a momentary sensation of terror on seeing a man lying asleep by the side of the pool. She quickly recovered herself, remembering that John allowed the public to use the footpath through the wood; but she started again when the man, who must have been a bad sleeper to be aroused by her light footstep, lifted his head, and displayed the white face of the "Softy."

He rose slowly from the ground upon seeing Mrs. Mellish, and crawled away, looking at her as he went, but not making any acknowledgment of her presence.

Aurora could not repress a brief terrified shudder; it seemed as if her footfall had startled some viperish creature, some loathsome member of the reptile race, and scared it from its lurking-place.

Steeve Hargraves disappeared amongst the trees as Mrs. Mellish walked on, her head proudly erect, but her cheek a shade paler than before this unexpected encounter with the "Softy."

Her joyous gladness in the bright summer's day had forsaken her as suddenly as she had met Stephen Hargraves; that bright smile, which was

even brighter than the morning sunshine, faded out, and left her face unnaturally grave.

"Good heavens!" she exclaimed, "how foolish I am! I am actually afraid of that man,—afraid of that pitiful coward who could hurt my feeble old dog. As if such a creature as that could do one any mischief!"

Of course this was very wisely argued, as no coward ever by any chance worked any mischief upon this earth since the Saxon prince was stabbed in the back while drinking at his kinswoman's gate, or since brave King John and his creature plotted together what they should do with the little boy Arthur.

Aurora walked slowly across the lawn towards that end of the house at which the apartment sacred to Mr. Mellish was situated. She entered softly at the open window, and laid her hand upon John's shoulder, as he sat at a table covered with a litter of account-books, racing-lists, and disorderly papers.

He started at the touch of the familiar hand.

"My darling, I'm so glad you've come in. How long you've been!"

She looked at her little jewelled watch. Poor

John had loaded her with trinkets and gewgaws. His chief grief was that she was a wealthy heiress, and that he could give her nothing but the adoration of his simple, honest heart.

"Only half-past one, you silly old John," she said. "What made you think me late?"

"Because I wanted to consult you about something, and to tell you something. Such good news!"

"About what?"

"About the trainer."

She shrugged her shoulders, and pursed up her red lips with a bewitching little gesture of indifference.

"Is that all?" she said.

"Yes; but aint you glad we've got the man at last—the very man to suit us, I think? Where's John Pastern's letter?"

Mr. Mellish searched amongst the litter of papers upon the table, while Aurora, leaning against the framework of the open window, watched him, and laughed at his embarrassment.

She had recovered her spirits, and looked the very picture of careless gladness as she leaned in one of those graceful and unstudied attitudes

peculiar to her, supported by the framework of the window, and with the trailing jessamine waving round her in the soft summer breeze. She lifted her ungloved hand, and gathered the roses above her head as she talked to her husband.

"You most disorderly and unmethodical of men," she said, laughing; "I wouldn't mind betting five to one you won't find it."

I'm afraid that Mr. Mellish muttered an oath as he tossed about the heterogeneous mass of papers in his search for the missing document.

"I had it five minutes before you came in, Aurora," he said, "and now there's not a sign of it——Oh, here it is!"

Mr. Mellish unfolded the letter, and, smoothing it out upon the table before him, cleared his throat preparatory to reading the epistle. Aurora still leaned against the window-frame, half in and half out of the room, singing a snatch of a popular song, and trying to gather an obstinate half-blown rose which grew provokingly out of reach.

"You're attending, Aurora?"

"Yes, dearest and best."

"But do come in. You can't hear a word there."

Aurora shrugged her shoulders, as who should say, "I submit to the command of a tyrant," and advanced a couple of paces from the window; then looking at John with an enchantingly insolent toss of her head, she folded her hands behind her, and told him she would "be good." She was a careless, impetuous creature, dreadfully forgetful of what Mrs. Walter Powell called her "responsibilities;" every mortal thing by turns, and never any one thing for two minutes together; happy, generous, affectionate; taking life as a glorious summer's holiday, and thanking God for the bounty which made it so pleasant to her.

Mr. John Pastern began his letter with an apology for having so long deferred writing. He had lost the address of the person he had wished to recommend, and had waited until the man wrote to him a second time.

"I think he will suit you very well," the letter went on to say, "as he is well up in his business, having had plenty of experience, as groom, jockey, and trainer. He is only thirty years of age, but met with an accident some time since, which lamed him for life. He was half killed in a steeple-chase in Prussia, and was for upwards of a

year in a hospital at Berlin. His name is James Conyers, and he can have a character from——"

The letter dropped out of John Mellish's hand as he looked up at his wife. It was not a scream which she had uttered. It was a gasping cry, more terrible to hear than the shrillest scream that ever came from the throat of woman in all the long history of womanly distress.

"Aurora! Aurora!"

He looked at her, and his own face changed and whitened at the sight of hers. So terrible a transformation had come over her during the reading of that letter, that the shock could not have been greater had he looked up and seen another person in her place.

"It's wrong; it's wrong!" she cried hoarsely; "you've read the name wrong. It can't be that!"

"What name?"

"What name?" she echoed fiercely, her face flaming up with a wild fury,—"that name! I tell you, it *can't* be. Give me the letter."

He obeyed her mechanically, picking up the paper and handing it to her, but never removing his eyes from her face.

She snatched it from him; looked at it for a few moments, with her eyes dilated and her lips apart; then, reeling back two or three paces, her knees bent under her, and she fell heavily to the ground.

CHAPTER III.

MR. JAMES CONYERS.

The first week in July brought James Conyers, the new trainer, to Mellish Park. John had made no particular inquiries as to the man's character of any of his former employers, as a word from Mr. Pastern was all-sufficient.

Mr. Mellish had endeavoured to discover the cause of Aurora's agitation at the reading of John Pastern's letter. She had fallen like a dead creature at his feet; she had been hysterical throughout the remainder of the day, and delirious in the ensuing night, but she had not uttered one word calculated to throw any light upon the secret of her strange manifestation of emotion.

Her husband sat by her bedside upon the day after that on which she had fallen into the death-like swoon; watching her with a grave, anxious

face, and earnest eyes that never wandered from her own.

He was suffering very much the same agony that Talbot Bulstrode had endured at Felden on the receipt of his mother's letter. The dark wall was slowly rising and separating him from the woman he loved. He was now to discover the tortures known only to the husband whose wife is parted from him by that which has more power to sever than any width of land or wide extent of ocean—*a secret*.

He watched the pale face lying on the pillow; the large, black, haggard eyes, wide open, and looking blankly out at the far-away purple tree-tops in the horizon; but there was no clue to the mystery in any line of that beloved countenance; there was little more than an expression of weariness, as if the soul, looking out of that white face, was so utterly enfeebled as to have lost all power to feel anything but a vague yearning for rest.

The wide casement windows were open, but the day was hot and oppressive—oppressively still and sunny; the landscape sweltering under a yellow haze, as if the very atmosphere had been opaque

with molten gold. Even the roses in the garden seemed to feel the influence of the blazing summer sky, dropping their heavy heads like human sufferers from headache. The mastiff Bow-wow, lying under an acacia upon the lawn, was as peevish as any captious elderly gentleman, and snapped spitefully at a frivolous butterfly that wheeled, and spun, and threw somersaults about the dog's head. Beautiful as was this summer's day, it was one on which people are apt to lose their tempers, and quarrel with each other, by reason of the heat; every man feeling a secret conviction that his neighbour is in some way to blame for the sultriness of the atmosphere, and that it would be cooler if he were out of the way. It was one of those days on which invalids are especially fractious, and hospital nurses murmur at their vocation; a day on which third-class passengers travelling long distances by excursion train are savagely clamorous for beer at every station, and hate each other for the narrowness and hardness of the carriage seats, and for the inadequate means of ventilation provided by the railway company; a day on which stern business men revolt against the ceaseless grinding of the wheel, and, suddenly

reckless of consequences, rush wildly to the Crown and Sceptre, to cool their overheated systems with water souchy and still hock; an abnormal day, upon which the machinery of every-day life gets out of order, and runs riot throughout twelve suffocating hours.

John Mellish, sitting patiently by his wife's side, thought very little of the summer weather. I doubt if he knew whether the month was January or June. For him earth only held one creature, and she was ill and in distress—distress from which he was powerless to save her—distress the very nature of which he was ignorant.

His voice trembled when he spoke to her.

"My darling, you have been very ill," he said.

She looked at him with a smile so unlike her own that it was more painful to him to see than the loudest agony of tears, and stretched out her hand. He took the burning hand in his, and held it while he talked to her.

"Yes, dearest, you have been ill; but Morton says the attack was merely hysterical, and that you will be yourself again to-morrow, so there's no occasion for anxiety on that score. What grieves me, darling, is to see that there is something on

your mind; something which has been the real cause of your illness."

She turned her face upon the pillow, and tried to snatch her hand from his in her impatience, but he held it tightly in both his own.

"Does my speaking of yesterday distress you, Aurora?" he asked gravely.

"Distress me? Oh, no!"

"Then tell me, darling, why the mention of that man, the trainer's name, had such a terrible effect upon you."

"The doctor told you that the attack was hysterical," she said coldly; "I suppose I was hysterical and nervous yesterday."

"But the name, Aurora, the name. This James Conyers—who is he?" He felt the hand he held tighten convulsively upon his own, as he mentioned the trainer's name.

"Who is this man? Tell me, Aurora. For God's sake, tell me the truth."

She turned her face towards him once more, as he said this.

"If you only want the truth from me, John, you must ask me nothing. Remember what I said to you at the Château d'Arques. It was a secret that

parted me from Talbot Bulstrode. You trusted me then, John,—you must trust me to the end; if you cannot trust me——" she stopped suddenly, and the tears welled slowly up to her large, mournful eyes, as she looked at her husband.

"What, dearest?"

"We must part; as Talbot and I parted."

"Part!" he cried; "my love, my love! Do you think there is anything upon this earth strong enough to part us, except death? Do you think that any combination of circumstances, however strange, however inexplicable, would ever cause me to doubt your honour; or to tremble for my own? Could I be here if I doubted you? could I sit by your side, asking you these questions, if I feared the issue? Nothing shall shake my confidence; nothing can. But have pity on me; think how bitter a grief it is to sit here, with your hand in mine, and to know that there is a secret between us. Aurora, tell me,—this man, this Conyers,—what is he, and who is he?"

"You know that as well as I do. A groom once; afterwards a jockey; and now a trainer."

"But you know him?"

"I have seen him."

"When?"

"Some years ago, when he was in my father's service."

John Mellish breathed more freely for a moment. The man had been a groom at Felden Woods, that was all. This accounted for the fact of Aurora's recognizing his name; but not for her agitation. He was no nearer the clue to the mystery than before.

"James Conyers was in your father's service," he said thoughtfully; "but why should the mention of his name yesterday have caused you such emotion?"

"I cannot tell you."

"It is another secret, then, Aurora," he said reproachfully; "or has this man anything to do with the old secret of which you told me at the Château d'Arques?"

She did not answer him.

"Ah, I see; I understand, Aurora," he added, after a pause. "This man was a servant at Felden Woods; a spy, perhaps; and he discovered the secret, and traded upon it, as servants often have done before. This caused your agitation at hearing his name. You were afraid that he would come here and annoy you, making use of this secret to

extort money, and keeping you in perpetual terror of him. I think I can understand it all. I am right; am I not?"

She looked at him with something of the expression of a hunted animal that finds itself at bay.

"Yes, John."

"This man—this groom—knows something of —of the secret."

"He does."

John Mellish turned away his head, and buried his face in his hands. What cruel anguish! what bitter degradation! This man, a groom, a servant, was in the confidence of his wife; and had such power to harass and alarm her, that the very mention of his name was enough to cast her to the earth, as if stricken by sudden death. What, in the name of heaven, could this secret be, which was in the keeping of a servant, and yet could not be told to him? He bit his lip till his strong teeth met upon the quivering flesh, in the silent agony of that thought. What could it be? He had sworn, only a minute before, to trust in her blindly to the end; and yet, and yet—— His massive frame shook from head to heel in that noiseless struggle; doubt and despair rose like twin-

demons in his soul; but he wrestled with them, and overcame them; and, turning with a white face to his wife, said quietly—

"I will press these painful questions no further, Aurora. I will write to Pastern, and tell him that the man will not suit us; and——"

He was rising to leave her bedside, when she laid her hand upon his arm.

"Don't write to Mr. Pastern, John," she said; "the man will suit you very well, I dare say. I had rather he came."

"You wish him to come here?"

"Yes."

"But he will annoy you; he will try to extort money from you."

"He would do that in any case, since he is alive. I thought that he was dead."

"Then you really wish him to come here?"

"I do."

John Mellish left his wife's room inexpressibly relieved. The secret could not be so very terrible after all, since she was willing that the man who knew it should come to Mellish Park; where there was at least a remote chance of his revealing it to her husband. Perhaps, after all, this mystery

involved others rather than herself,—her father's commercial integrity—her mother? He had heard very little of that mother's history; perhaps she—— Pshaw! why weary himself with speculative surmises? He had promised to trust her, and the hour had come in which he was called upon to keep his promise. He wrote to Mr. Pastern, accepting his recommendation of James Conyers, and waited rather impatiently to see what kind of man the trainer was.

He received a letter from Conyers, very well written and worded, to the effect that he would arrive at Mellish Park upon the 3rd of July.

Aurora had recovered from her brief hysterical attack when this letter arrived; but as she was still weak and out of spirits, her medical man recommended change of air; so Mr. and Mrs. Mellish drove off to Harrogate upon the 28th of June, leaving Mrs. Powell behind them at the Park.

The ensign's widow had been scrupulously kept out of Aurora's room during her short illness; being held at bay by John, who coolly shut the door in the lady's sympathetic face, telling her that he'd wait upon his wife himself, and that when he wanted female assistance he would ring for Mrs. Mellish's maid.

Now Mrs. Walter Powell, being afflicted with that ravenous curiosity common to people who live in other people's houses, felt herself deeply injured by this line of conduct. There were mysteries and secrets afloat, and she was not to be allowed to discover them; there was a skeleton in the house, and she was not to anatomize the bony horror. She scented trouble and sorrow as carnivorous animals scent their prey; and yet she who hated Aurora was not to be allowed to riot at the unnatural feast.

Why is it that the dependents in a household are so feverishly inquisitive about the doings and sayings, the manners and customs, the joys and sorrows, of those who employ them? Is it that, having abnegated for themselves all active share in life, they take an unhealthy interest in those who are in the thick of the strife? Is it because, being cut off in a great measure by the nature of their employment from family ties and family pleasures, they feel a malicious delight in all family trials and vexations, and the ever-recurring breezes which disturb the domestic atmosphere? Remember this, husbands and wives, fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, brothers and sisters,

when you quarrel. *Your servants enjoy the fun.* Surely that recollection ought to be enough to keep you for ever peaceful and friendly. Your servants listen at your doors, and repeat your spiteful speeches in the kitchen, and watch you while they wait at table, and understand every sarcasm, every innuendo, every look, as well as those at whom the cruel glances and the stinging words are aimed. They understand your sulky silence, your studied and over-acted politeness. The most polished form your hate and anger can take is as transparent to those household spies as if you threw knives at each other, or pelted your enemy with the side-dishes and vegetables, after the fashion of disputants in a pantomime. Nothing that is done in the parlour is lost upon these quiet, well-behaved watchers from the kitchen. They laugh at you; nay worse, they pity you. They discuss your affairs, and make out your income, and settle what you can afford to do and what you can't afford to do; they prearrange the disposal of your wife's fortune, and look prophetically forward to the day when you will avail yourself of the advantages of the new Bankruptcy Act. They know why you live on bad terms with your eldest daughter, and

why your favourite son was turned out of doors; and they take a morbid interest in every dismal secret of your life. You don't allow them followers; you look blacker than thunder if you see Mary's sister or John's poor old mother sitting meekly in your hall; you are surprised if the postman brings them letters, and attribute the fact to the pernicious system of over-educating the masses; you shut them from their homes and their kindred, their lovers and their friends; you deny them books, you grudge them a peep at your newspaper; and then you lift up your eyes and wonder at them because they are inquisitive, and because the staple of their talk is scandal and gossip.

Mrs. Walter Powell, having been treated by most of her employers, as a species of upper servant, had acquired all the instincts of a servant; and she determined to leave no means untried in order to discover the cause of Aurora's illness, which the doctor had darkly hinted to her had more to do with the mind than the body.

John Mellish had ordered a carpenter to repair the lodge at the north gate, for the accommodation of James Conyers; and John's old trainer,

Langley, was to receive his colleague and introduce him to the stables.

The new trainer made his appearance at the lodge-gates in the glowing July sunset; he was accompanied by no less a person than Steeve Hargraves the "Softy," who had been lurking about the station upon the look out for a job, and who had been engaged by Mr. Conyers to carry his portmanteau.

To the surprise of the trainer, Stephen Hargraves set down his burden at the park gates.

"You'll have to find some one else to carry it th' rest 't' ro-ad," he said, touching his greasy cap, and extending his broad palm to receive the expected payment.

Mr. James Conyers was rather a dashing fellow, with no small amount of that quality which is generally termed "swagger," so he turned sharply round upon the "Softy" and asked him what the devil he meant.

"I mean that I mayn't go inside yon geates," muttered Stephen Hargraves; "I mean that I've been toorned oot of yon pleace that I've lived in, man and boy, for forty year,—toorned oot like a dog, neck and crop."

Mr. Conyers threw away the stump of his cigar and stared superciliously at the "Softy."

"What does the man mean?" he asked of the woman who had opened the gates.

"Why, poor fellow, he's a bit fond, sir, and him and Mrs. Mellish didn't get on very well: she has a rare spirit, and I *have* heard that she horsewhipped him for beating her favourite dog. Any ways, master turned him out of his service."

"Because my lady had horsewhipped him. Servants'-hall justice all the world over," said the trainer, laughing, and lighting a second cigar from a metal fusee-box in his waistcoat pocket.

"Yes, that's joostice, aint it?" the "Softy" said eagerly. "You wouldn't like to be toorned oot of a pleace as you'd lived in forty year, would you? But Mrs. Mellish has a rare spirit, bless her pretty feace!"

The blessing enunciated by Mr. Stephen Hargraves had such a very ominous sound, that the new trainer, who was evidently a shrewd, observant fellow, took his cigar from his mouth on purpose to stare at him. The white face, lighted up by a pair of red eyes with a dim glimmer in them, was by no means the most agreeable of countenances;

but Mr. Conyers looked at the man for some moments, holding him by the collar of his coat in order to do so with more deliberation: then pushing the "Softy" away with an affably contemptuous gesture, he said, laughing—

"You're a character, my friend, it strikes me; and not too safe a character either. I'm dashed if I should like to offend you. There's a shilling for your trouble, my man," he added tossing the money into Steeve's extended palm with careless dexterity.

"I suppose I can leave my portmanteau here till to-morrow, ma'am?" he said, turning to the woman at the lodge. "I'd carry it down to the house myself if I wasn't lame."

He was such a handsome fellow, and had such an easy, careless manner, that the simple Yorkshire woman was quite subdued by his fascinations.

"Leave it here, sir, and welcome," she said, curtsying, "and my master shall take it to the house for you as soon as he comes in. Begging your pardon, sir, but I suppose you're the new gentleman that's expected in the stables?"

"Precisely."

"Then I was to tell you, sir, that they've fitted

up the north lodge for you: but you was to please go straight to the house, and the housekeeper was to make you comfortable and give you a bed for to-night."

Mr. Conyers nodded, thanked her, wished her good night, and limped slowly away, through the shadows of the evening, and under the shelter of the over-arching trees. He stepped aside from the broad carriage-drive on to the dewy turf that bordered it, choosing the softest, mossiest places with a sybarite's instinct. Look at him as he takes his slow way under those glorious branches, in the holy stillness of the summer sunset, his face sometimes lighted by the low, lessening rays, sometimes darkened by the shadows of the leaves above his head. He is wonderfully handsome—wonderfully and perfectly handsome—the very perfection of physical beauty; faultless in proportion, as if each line in his face and form had been measured by the sculptor's rule, and carved by the sculptor's chisel. He is a man about whose beauty there can be no dispute, whose perfection servant-maids and duchesses must alike confess—albeit they are not bound to admire; yet it is rather a sensual type of beauty, this splendour of

form and colour, unallied to any special charm of expression. Look at him now, as he stops to rest, leaning against the trunk of a tree, and smoking his big cigar with easy enjoyment. He is thinking. His dark-blue eyes, deeper in colour by reason of the thick black lashes which fringe them, are half closed, and have a dreamy, semi-sentimental expression, which might lead you to suppose the man was musing upon the beauty of the summer sunset. He is thinking of his losses on the Chester Cup, the wages he is to get from John Mellish, and the perquisites likely to appertain to the situation. You give him credit for thoughts to match with his dark, violet-hued eyes, and the exquisite modelling of his mouth and chin; you give him a mind as æsthetically perfect as his face and figure, and you recoil on discovering what a vulgar, every-day sword may lurk under that beautiful scabbard. Mr. James Conyers is, perhaps, no worse than other men of his station; but he is decidedly no better. He is only very much handsomer; and you have no right to be angry with him because his opinions and sentiments are exactly what they would have been if he had had red hair and a pug nose. With what

wonderful wisdom has George Eliot told us that people are not any better because they have long eyelashes! Yet it must be that there is something anomalous in this outward beauty and inward ugliness; for, in spite of all experience, we revolt against it, and are incredulous to the last, believing that the palace which is outwardly so splendid can scarcely be ill furnished within. Heaven help the woman who sells her heart for a handsome face, and awakes when the bargain has been struck, to discover the foolishness of such an exchange!

It took Mr. Conyers a long while to walk from the lodge to the house. I do not know how, technically, to describe his lameness. He had fallen, with his horse, in the Prussian steeple-chase, which had so nearly cost him his life, and his left leg had been terribly injured. The bones had been set by wonderful German surgeons, who put the shattered leg together as if it had been a Chinese puzzle, but who, with all their skill, could not prevent the contraction of the sinews, which had left the jockey lamed for life, and no longer fit to ride in any race whatever. He was of the middle height, and weighed something over eleven stone,

and had never ridden except in Continental steeple-chases.

Mr. James Conyers paused a few paces from the house, and gravely contemplated the irregular pile of buildings before him.

"A snug crib," he muttered: "plenty of tin hereabouts, I should think, from the look of the place."

Being ignorant of the geography of the neighbourhood, and being, moreover, by no means afflicted by an excess of modesty, Mr. Conyers went straight to the principal door, and rang the bell sacred to visitors and the family.

He was admitted by a grave old man-servant, who, after deliberately inspecting his brown shooting-coat, coloured shirt-front, and felt hat, asked him, with considerable asperity, what he was pleased to want.

Mr. Conyers explained that he was the new trainer, and that he wished to see the housekeeper; but he had hardly finished doing so, when a door in an angle of the hall was softly opened, and Mrs. Walter Powell peeped out of the snug little apartment sacred to her hours of privacy.

"Perhaps the young man will be so good as to step in here," she said, addressing herself apparently to space, but indirectly to James Conyers.

The young man took off his hat, uncovering a mass of luxuriant brown curls, and limped across the hall in obedience to Mrs. Powell's invitation.

"I dare say I shall be able to give you any information you require."

James Conyers smiled, wondering whether the bilious-looking party, as he mentally designated Mrs. Powell, could give him any information about the York Summer Meeting; but he bowed politely, and said he merely wanted to know where he was to hang out—he stopped and apologized—where he was to sleep that night, and whether there were any letters for him. But Mrs. Powell was by no means inclined to let him off so cheaply. She set to work to pump him, and laboured so assiduously that she soon exhausted that very small amount of intelligence which he was disposed to afford her, being perfectly aware of the process to which he was subjected, and more than equal to the lady in dexterity. The ensign's widow, therefore, ascertained little more than that Mr. Conyers was a perfect stranger

to John Mellish and his wife, neither of whom he had ever seen.

Having failed to gain much by this interview, Mrs. Powell was anxious to bring it to a speedy termination.

"Perhaps you would like a glass of wine after your walk?" she said; "I'll ring for some, and I can inquire at the same time about your letters. I dare say you are anxious to hear from the relatives you have left at home."

Mr. Conyers smiled for the second time. He had neither had a home nor any relatives to speak of, since the most infantine period of his existence; but had been thrown upon the world a sharp-witted adventurer at seven or eight years old. The "relatives" for whose communication he was looking out so eagerly were members of the humbler class of book-men with whom he did business.

The servant despatched by Mrs. Powell returned with a decanter of sherry and about half a dozen letters for Mr. Conyers.

"You'd better bring the lamp, William," said Mrs. Powell, as the man left the room; "for I'm sure you'll never be able to read your letters by this light," she added politely to Mr. Conyers.

The fact was, that Mrs. Powell, afflicted by that diseased curiosity of which I have spoken, wanted to know what kind of correspondents these were whose letters the trainer was so anxious to receive, and sent for the lamp in order that she might get the full benefit of any scraps of information to be got at by rapid glances and dexterously stolen peeps.

The servant brought a brilliant camphine-lamp, and Mr. Conyers, not at all abashed by Mrs. Powell's condescension, drew his chair close to the table, and after tossing off a glass of sherry, settled himself to the perusal of his letters.

The ensign's widow, with some needlework in her hand, sat directly opposite to him at the small round table, with nothing but the pedestal of the lamp between them.

James Conyers took up the first letter, examined the superscription and seal, tore open the envelope, read the brief communication upon half a sheet of note-paper, and thrust it into his waistcoat-pocket. Mrs. Powell, using her eyes to the utmost, saw nothing but a few lines in a scratchy plebeian handwriting, and a signature which, seen at a disadvantage upside-down, didn't look unlike

"Johnson." The second envelope contained only a tissue-paper betting-list; the third held a dirty scrap of paper with a few words scrawled in pencil; but at sight of the uppermost envelope of the remaining three Mr. James Conyers started as if he had been shot. Mrs. Powell looked from the face of the trainer to the superscription of the letter, and was scarcely less surprised than Mr. Conyers. The superscription was in the handwriting of Aurora Mellish.

It was a peculiar hand; a hand about which there could be no mistake; not an elegant Italian hand, sloping, slender, and feminine, but large and bold, with ponderous up-strokes and down-strokes, easy to recognize at a greater distance than that which separated Mrs. Powell from the trainer. There was no room for any doubt. Mrs. Mellish had written to her husband's servant, and the man was evidently familiar with her hand, yet surprised at receiving her letter.

He tore open the envelope, and read the contents eagerly twice over, frowning darkly as he read.

Mrs. Powell suddenly remembered that she had left part of her needlework upon a chiffonier

behind the young man's chair, and rose quietly to fetch it. He was so much engrossed by the letter in his hand that he was not aware of the pale face which peered for one brief moment over his shoulder, as the faded, hungry eyes stole a glance at the writing on the page.

The letter was written on the first side of a sheet of note-paper, with only a few words carried over to the second page. It was this second page which Mrs. Powell saw. The words written at the top of the leaf were these:—"Above all, *express no surprise.*—A."

There was no ordinary conclusion to the letter; no other signature than this big capital A.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TRAINER'S MESSENGER.

Mr. James Conyers made himself very much at home at Mellish Park. Poor Langley, the invalid trainer, who was a Yorkshireman, felt himself almost bewildered by the easy insolence of his town-bred successor. Mr. Conyers looked so much too handsome and dashing for his office, that the grooms and stable-boys bowed down to him, and paid court to him as they had never done to simple Langley, who had been very often obliged to enforce his commands with a horsewhip or a serviceable leather strap. James Conyers's handsome face was a capital with which that gentleman knew very well how to trade, and he took the full amount of interest that was to be got for it without compunction. I am sorry to be obliged to confess that this man, who had sat in the artists' studios and the life academies for Apollo and Antinous,

was selfish to the backbone; and so long as he was well fed and clothed and housed and provided for, cared very little whence the food and clothing came, or who kept the house that sheltered him, or filled the purse which he jingled in his trousers-pocket. Heaven forbid that I should be called upon for his biography. I only know that he sprang from the mire of the streets, like some male Aphrodite rising from the mud; that he was a blackleg in the gutter at four years of age, and a "welsher" in the matter of marbles and hardbake before his fifth birthday. Even then he was for ever reaping the advantage of a handsome face; for tender-hearted matrons, who would have been deaf to the cries of a snub-nosed urchin, petted and compassionated the pretty boy.

In his earliest childhood he learned therefore to trade upon his beauty, and to get the most that he could for that merchandise; and he grew up utterly unprincipled, and carried his handsome face out into the world to help him on to fortune. He was extravagant, lazy, luxurious, and selfish; but he had that easy indifferent grace of manner which passes with shallow observers for good-nature. He would not have gone three paces out

of his way to serve his best friend; but he smiled and showed his handsome white teeth with equal liberality to all his acquaintance; and took credit for being a frank, generous-hearted fellow on the strength of that smile. He was skilled in the uses of that gilt gingerbread of generosity which so often passes current for sterling gold. He was dexterous in the handling of those cogged dice which have all the rattle of the honest ivories. A slap on the back, a hearty shake of the hand, often went as far from him as the loan of a sovereign from another man, and Jim Conyers was firmly believed in by the doubtful gentlemen with whom he associated, as a good-natured fellow who was nobody's enemy but his own. He had that superficial Cockney cleverness which is generally called knowledge of the world; knowledge of the worst side of the world, and utter ignorance of all that is noble upon earth, it might perhaps be more justly called. He had matriculated in the streets of London, and graduated on the race-course; he had never read any higher literature than the Sunday papers and the 'Racing Calendar,' but he contrived to make a very little learning go a long way, and was generally spoken of by his

employers as a superior young man, considerably above his station.

Mr. Conyers expressed himself very well contented with the rustic lodge which had been chosen for his dwelling-house. He condescendingly looked on while the stable-lads carried the furniture, selected for him by the housekeeper from the spare servants' rooms, from the house to the lodge, and assisted in the arrangement of the tiny rustic chambers, limping about in his shirt-sleeves, and showing himself wonderfully handy with a hammer and a pocketful of nails. He sat upon a table and drank beer with such charming affability, that the stable-lads were as grateful to him as if he had treated them to that beverage. Indeed, seeing the frank cordiality with which James Conyers smote the lads upon the back, and prayed them to be active with the can, it was almost difficult to remember that he was not the giver of the feast, and that it was Mr. John Mellish who would have to pay the brewer's bill. What, amongst all the virtues, which adorn this earth, can be more charming than the generosity of upper servants? With what hearty hospitality they pass the bottle! how liberally they throw

the seven-shilling gunpowder into the teapot! how unsparingly they spread the twenty-penny fresh butter on the toast! and what a glorious welcome they give to the droppers-in of the servants' hall! It is scarcely wonderful that the recipients of their bounty forget that it is the master of the household who will be called upon for the expenses of the banquet, and who will look ruefully at the total of the quarter's housekeeping.

It was not to be supposed that so dashing a fellow as Mr. James Conyers could, in the lodginghouse-keepers' *patois*, "do for" himself. He required a humble drudge to black his boots, make his bed, boil his kettle, cook his dinner, and keep the two little chambers at the lodge in decent order. Casting about in a reflective mood for a fitting person for this office, his recreant fancy hit upon Steeve Hargraves the "Softy." He was sitting upon the sill of an open window in the little parlour of the lodge, smoking a cigar and drinking out of a can of beer, when this idea came into his head. He was so tickled by the notion, that he took his cigar from his mouth in order to laugh at his ease.

"The man's a character," he said, still laughing, "and I'll have him to wait upon me. He's been forbid the place, has he? Turned out neck and crop because my Lady Highropes horsewhipped him. Never mind that; *I'll* give him leave to come back, if it's only for the fun of the thing."

He limped out upon the high-road half an hour after this, and went into the village to find Steeve Hargraves. He had little difficulty in doing this, as everybody knew the "Softy," and a chorus of boys volunteered to fetch him from the house of the doctor, in whose service he did odd jobs, and brought him to Mr. Conyers five minutes afterwards, looking very hot and dirty, but as pale of complexion as usual.

Stephen Hargraves agreed very readily to abandon his present occupation and to wait upon the trainer, in consideration of five shillings a week and his board and lodging; but his countenance fell when he discovered that Mr. Conyers was in the service of John Mellish, and lived on the outskirts of the park.

"You're afraid of setting foot upon his estate, are you?" said the trainer, laughing. "Never mind, Steeve, *I* give you leave to come, and I

should like to see the man or woman in that house who'll interfere with any whim of mine. *I* give you leave. You understand."

The "Softy" touched his cap and tried to look as if he understood; but it was very evident that he did not understand, and it was some time before Mr. Conyers could persuade him that his life would be safe within the gates of Mellish Park. But he was ultimately induced to trust himself at the north lodge, and promised to present himself there in the course of the evening.

Now Mr. James Conyers had exerted himself as much in order to overcome the cowardly objections of this rustic clown as he could have done if Steeve Hargraves had been the most accomplished body servant in the three Ridings. Perhaps there was some deeper motive than any regard for the man himself in this special preference for the "Softy;" some lurking malice, some petty spite, the key to which was hidden in his own breast. If, while standing smoking in the village street, *chaffing* the "Softy" for the edification of the lookers-on, and taking so much trouble to secure such an ignorant and brutish esquire,—if one shadow of the future, so very near at hand, could

have fallen across his path, surely he would have instinctively recoiled from the striking of that ill-omened bargain.

But James Conyers had no superstition; indeed, he was so pleasantly free from that weakness as to be a disbeliever in all things in heaven and on earth, except himself and his own merits; so he hired the "Softy," for the fun of the thing, as he called it, and walked slowly back to the park gates to watch for the return of Mr. and Mrs. Mellish, who were expected that afternoon.

The woman at the lodge brought him out a chair, and begged him to rest himself under the portico. He thanked her with a pleasant smile, and sitting down amongst the roses and honeysuckles, lighted another cigar.

"You'll find the north lodge dull, I'm thinking, sir," the woman said, from the open window, where she had reseated herself with her needlework.

"Well, it isn't very lively, ma'am, certainly," answered Mr. Conyers, "but it serves my purpose well enough. The place is lonely enough for a man to be murdered there and nobody be any the wiser; but as I have nothing to lose, it will answer well enough for me."

He might perhaps have said a good deal more about the place, but at this moment the sound of wheels upon the high-road announced the return of the travellers, and two or three minutes afterwards the carriage dashed through the gate, and past Mr. James Conyers.

Whatever power this man might have over Aurora, whatever knowledge of a compromising secret he might have obtained and traded upon, the fearlessness of her nature showed itself now as always, and she never flinched at the sight of him. If he had placed himself in her way on purpose to watch the effect of his presence, he must surely have been disappointed; for except that a cold shadow of disdain passed over her face as the carriage drove by him, he might have imagined himself unseen. She looked pale and careworn, and her eyes seemed to have grown larger, since her illness; but she held her head as erect as ever, and had still the air of imperial grandeur which constituted one of her chief charms.

"So that is Mr. Mellish," said Conyers, as the carriage disappeared. "He seems very fond of his wife."

"Ay, sure; and he is too. Fond of her!

Why they say there isn't another such couple in all Yorkshire. And she's fond of him, too, bless her handsome face! But who wouldn't be fond of Master John?"

Mr. Conyers shrugged his shoulders; these patriarchal habits and domestic virtues had no particular charm for him.

"She had plenty of money, hadn't she?" he asked, by way of bringing the conversation into a more rational channel.

"Plenty of money! I should think so. They say her pa gave her fifty thousand pounds down on her wedding-day; not that our master wants money; he's got enough and to spare."

"Ah, to be sure," answered Mr. Conyers; "that's always the way of it. The banker gave her fifty thousand, did he? If Miss Floyd had married a poor devil, now, I don't suppose her father would have given her fifty sixpences."

"Well, no; if she'd gone against his wishes, I don't suppose he would. He was here in the spring,—a nice, white-haired old gentleman; but failing fast."

"Failing fast. And Mrs. Mellish will come into a quarter of a million at his death, I suppose.

Good afternoon, ma'am. It's a queer world." Mr. Conyers took up his stick, and limped away under the trees, repeating this ejaculation as he went. It was a habit with this gentleman to attribute the good fortune of other people to some eccentricity in the machinery of life, by which he, the only really deserving person in the world, had been deprived of his natural rights. He went through the wood into a meadow where some of the horses under his charge were at grass, and spent upwards of an hour lounging about the hedgerows, sitting on gates, smoking his pipe, and staring at the animals, which seemed about the hardest work he had to do in his capacity of trainer. "It isn't a very hard life, when all's said and done," he thought, as he looked at a group of mares and foals, who, in their eccentric diversions, were performing a species of Sir Roger de Coverley up and down the meadow. "It isn't a very hard life; for as long as a fellow swears hard and fast at the lads, and gets rid of plenty of oats, he's right enough. These country gentlemen always judge a man's merits by the quantity of corn they have to pay for. Feed their horses as fat as pigs, and never enter 'em except among

such a set of screws as an active pig could beat; and they'll swear by you. They'd think more of having a horse win the Margate Plate, or the Hampstead Heath Sweepstakes, than if he ran a good fourth in the Derby. Bless their innocent hearts! I should think fellows with plenty of money and no brains must have been invented for the good of fellows with plenty of brains and no money; and that's how we contrive to keep our equilibrium in the universal see-saw."

Mr. James Conyers, puffing lazy clouds of transparent blue smoke from his lips, and pondering thus, looked as sentimental as if he had been ruminating upon the last three pages of the 'Bride of Abydos,' or the death of Paul Dombey. He had that romantic style of beauty peculiar to dark-blue eyes and long black lashes; and he could not wonder what he should have for dinner without a dreamy pensiveness in the purple shadows of those deep-blue orbs. He had found the sentimentality of his beauty almost of greater use to him than the beauty itself. It was this sentimentality which always put him at an advantage with his employers. He looked like an exiled prince doing menial service in bitterness of

spirit and a turned-down collar. He looked like Lara returned to his own domains to train the horses of a usurper. He looked, in short, like anything but what he was,—a selfish, good-for-nothing, lazy scoundrel, who was well up in the useful art of doing the minimum of work, and getting the maximum of wages.

He strolled slowly back to his rustic habitation, where he found the "Softy" waiting for him; the kettle boiling upon a handful of bright fire, and some tea-things laid out upon the little round table. Mr. Convers looked rather contemptuously at the humble preparations.

"I've mashed the tea for 'ee," said the "Softy;" "I thought you'd like a coop."

The trainer shrugged his shoulders.

"I can't say I'm particular attached to the cat-lap," he said, laughing; "I've had rather too much of it when I've been in training,—half-and-half, warm tea and cold-drawn castor-oil. I'll send you into Doncaster for some spirits to-morrow, my man: or to-night, perhaps," he added reflectively, resting his elbow upon the table and his chin in the hollow of his hand.

He sat for some time in this thoughtful attitude,

his retainer Steeve Hargraves watching him intently all the while, with that half-wondering, half-admiring stare with which a very ugly creature—a creature so ugly as to know it is ugly—looks at a very handsome one.

At the close of his reverie, Mr. Conyers took out a clumsy silver watch, and sat for a few minutes staring vacantly at the dial.

"Close upon six," he muttered at last. "What time do they dine at the house, Steeve?"

"Seven o'clock," answered the "Softy."

"Seven o'clock. Then you'd have time to run there with a message, or a letter, and catch 'em just as they're going in to dinner."

The "Softy" stared aghast at his new master.

"A message or a letter," he repeated; "for Mr. Mellish?"

"No; for Mrs. Mellish."

"But I daren't," exclaimed Stephen Hargraves; "I daren't go nigh the house; least of all to speak to her. I don't forget the day she horsewhipped me. I've never seen her since, and I don't want to see her. You think I am a coward, don't 'ee?" he said, stopping suddenly, and looking at the trainer, whose handsome lips were

curved into a contemptuous smile. "You think I'm a coward, don't 'ee, now?" he repeated.

"Well, I don't think you are over-valiant," answered Mr. Conyers, "to be afraid of a woman, though she was the veriest devil that ever played fast and loose with a man."

"Shall I tell you what it is I am afraid of?" said Steeve Hargraves, hissing the words through his closed teeth in that unpleasant whisper peculiar to him. "It isn't Mrs. Mellish. It's myself. It's *this*,"—he grasped something in the loose pocket of his trousers as he spoke,—"it's *this*. I'm afraid to trust myself a-nigh her, for fear I should spring upon her, and cut her thro-at from ear to ear. I've seen her in my dreams sometimes, with her beautiful white thro-at laid open, and streaming oceans of blood; but, for all that, she's always had the broken whip in her hand, and she's always laughed at me. I've had many a dream about her; but I've never seen her dead or quiet; and I've never seen her without the whip."

The contemptuous smile died away from the trainer's lips as Steeve Hargraves made this revelation of his sentiments, and gave place to a

darkly thoughtful expression, which overshadowed the whole of his face.

"I've no such wonderful love for Mrs. Mellish myself," he said; "but she might live to be as old as Methuselah, for aught I care, if she'd——" He muttered something between his teeth, and walked up the little staircase to his bedroom, whistling a popular tune as he went.

He came down again with a dirty-looking leather desk in his hand; which he flung carelessly on to the table. It was stuffed with crumpled untidy-looking letters and papers, from among which he had considerable difficulty in selecting a tolerably clean sheet of note-paper.

"You'll take a letter to Mrs. Mellish, my friend," he said to Stephen, stooping over the table and writing as he spoke; "and you'll please to deliver it safe into her own hands. The windows will all be open this sultry weather, and you can watch till you see her in the drawing-room; and when you do, contrive to beckon her out, and give her this."

He had folded the sheet of paper by this time, and had sealed it carefully in an adhesive envelope.

"There's no need of any address," he said, as he handed the letter to Steeve Hargraves; "you know who it's for, and you won't give it to anybody else. There, get along with you. She'll say nothing to *you*, man, when she sees who the letter comes from."

The "Softy" looked darkly at his new employer; but Mr. James Conyers rather piqued himself upon a quality which he called determination, but which his traducers designated obstinacy, and he made up his mind that no one but Steeve Hargraves should carry the letter.

"Come," he said, "no nonsense, Mr. Stephen! Remember this: if I choose to employ you, and if I choose to send you on any errand whatsoever, there's no one in that house will dare to question my right to do it. Get along with you!"

He pointed, as he spoke, with the stem of his pipe, to the Gothic roof and ivied chimneys of the old house gleaming amongst a mass of foliage. "Get along with you, Mr. Stephen, and bring me an answer to that letter," he added, lighting his pipe and seating himself in his favourite attitude upon the window-sill,—an attitude which, like everything about him, was a half-careless, half-

defiant protest of his superiority to his position. "You needn't wait for a written answer. Yes or No will be quite enough, you may tell Mrs. Mellish."

The "Softy" whispered something, half inaudible, between his teeth; but he took the letter, and pulling his shabby rabbit-skin cap over his eyes, walked slowly off in the direction to which Mr. Conyers had pointed, with a half-contemptuous action, a few moments before.

"A queer fish," muttered the trainer, lazily watching the awkward figure of his attendant; "a queer fish; but it's rather hard if I can't manage *him*. I've twisted his betters round my little finger before to-day."

Mr. Conyers forgot that there are some natures which, although inferior in everything else, are strong by reason of their stubbornness, and not to be twisted out of their natural crookedness by any trick of management or skilfulness of handling.

The evening was sunless but sultry; there was a lowering darkness in the leaden sky, and an unnatural stillness in the atmosphere that prophesied the coming of a storm. The elements were taking breath for the struggle, and lying silently

in wait against the breaking of their fury. It would come by-and-by, the signal for the outburst, in a long, crackling peal of thunder that would shake the distant hills and flutter every leaf in the wood.

The trainer looked with an indifferent eye at the ominous aspect of the heavens. "I must go down to the stables, and send some of the boys to get the horses under cover," he said; "there'll be a storm before long." He took his stick and limped out of the cottage, still smoking; indeed, there were very few hours in the day, and not many during the night, in which Mr. Conyers was unprovided with his pipe or cigar.

Steeve Hargraves walked very slowly along the narrow pathway which led across the park to the flower-garden and lawn before the house. This north side of the park was wilder and less well kept than the rest; but the thick undergrowth swarmed with game, and the young hares flew backwards and forwards across the pathway, startled by the "Softy's" shambling tread, while every now and then the partridges rose in pairs from the tangled grass, and skimmed away under the low roof of foliage.

"If I was to meet Mr. Mellish's keeper here, he'd look at me black enough, I dare say," muttered the "Softy," "though I aint after the game. Lookin' at a pheasant's high treason in his mind, curse him!"

He put his hands low down in his pockets, as if scarcely able to resist the temptation to wring the neck of a splendid cock-pheasant that was strutting through the high grass, with a proud serenity of manner that implied a knowledge of the game-laws. The trees on the north side of the Park formed a species of leafy wall which screened the lawn, so that, coming from this northern side, the "Softy" emerged at once from the shelter into the smooth grass bordering this lawn, which was separated from the Park by an invisible fence.

As Steeve Hargraves, still sheltered from observation by the trees, approached the place, he saw that his errand was shortened, for Mrs. Mellish was leaning upon a low iron gate, with the dog Bow-wow, the dog that he had beaten, at her side.

He had left the narrow pathway and struck in amongst the undergrowth, in order to make a shorter cut to the flower-garden, and as he came

from under the shelter of the low branches which made a leafy cave about him, he left a long track of parted grass behind him, like the track of the footstep of a tiger, or the trail of a slow, ponderous serpent creeping towards its prey.

Aurora looked up at the sound of the shambling footstep, and, for the second time since she had beaten him, she encountered the gaze of the "Softy." She was very pale, almost as pale as her white dress, which was unenlivened by any scrap of colour, and which hung about her in loose folds that gave a statuesque grace to her figure. She was dressed with such evident carelessness that every fold of muslin seemed to tell how far away her thoughts had been when that hasty toilette was made. Her black brows contracted as she looked at the "Softy."

"I thought Mr. Mellish had dismissed you," she said, "and that you had been forbidden to come here?"

"Yes, ma'am, Muster Mellish did turn me out of the house I'd lived in, man and boy, nigh upon forty year; but I've got a new pleace now, and my new master sent me to you with a letter."

Watching the effect of his words, the "Softy" saw

a leaden change come over the pale face of his listener.

"What new master?" she asked.

Steeve Hargraves lifted his hand and pointed across his shoulder. She watched the slow motion of that clumsy hand, and her eyes seemed to grow larger as she saw the direction to which it pointed.

"Your new master is the trainer, James Conyers,—the man who lives at the north lodge?" she said.

"Yes, ma'am."

"What does he want with you?" she asked.

"I keep his place in order for him, ma'am, and run errands for him; and I've brought a letter."

"A letter? Ah, yes, give it me."

The "Softy" handed her the envelope. She took it slowly, without removing her eyes from his face, but watching him with a fixed and earnest look that seemed as if it would have fathomed something beneath the dull red eyes which met hers. A look that betrayed some doubtful terror hidden in her own breast, and a vague desire to penetrate the secrets of his.

She did not look at the letter, but held it half crushed in the hand hanging by her side.

"You can go," she said.

"I was to wait for an answer."

The black brows contracted again, and this time a bright gleam of fury kindled in the great black eyes.

"There is no answer," she said, thrusting the letter into the bosom of her dress, and turning to leave the gate; "there is no answer, and there shall be none till I choose. Tell your master that."

"It wasn't to be a written answer," persisted the "Softy;" "it was to be Yes or No, that's all; but I was to be sure and wait for it."

The half-witted creature saw some feeling of hate and fury in her face beyond her contemptuous hatred of himself, and took a savage pleasure in tormenting her. She struck her foot impatiently upon the grass, and plucking the letter from her breast, tore open the envelope, and read the few lines it contained. Few as they were, she stood for nearly five minutes with the open letter in her hand, separated from the "Softy" by the iron fence, and lost in thought. The silence was only broken during this pause by an occasional growl from the mastiff, who lifted his heavy lip, and

showed his feeble teeth for the edification of his old enemy.

She tore the letter into a hundred morsels, and flung it from her before she spoke. "Yes," she said at last; "tell your master that."

Steeve Hargraves touched his cap and went back through the grassy trail he had left, to carry this message to the trainer.

"She hates me bad enough," he muttered, as he stopped once to look back at the quiet white figure on the lawn, "but she hates t'oother chap worse."

CHAPTER V.

OUT IN THE RAIN.

The second dinner-bell rang five minutes after the "Softy" had left Aurora, and Mr. John Mellish came out upon the lawn to look for his wife. He came whistling across the grass, and whisking the roses with his pocket-handkerchief in very gaiety of heart. He had quite forgotten the anguish of that miserable morning after the receipt of Mr. Pastern's letter. He had forgotten all but that his Aurora was the loveliest and dearest of women, and that he trusted her with the boundless faith of his big, honest heart. "Why should I doubt such a noble, impetuous creature?" he thought; "doesn't every feeling and every sentiment write itself upon her lovely, expressive face in characters the veriest fool could read? If I please her, what bright smiles light up in her black eyes! If I vex her,—as I do, poor awkward idiot that I am, a

hundred times a day,—how the two black arches contract over her pretty impertinent nose, while the red lips pout defiance and disdain! Shall I doubt her because she keeps one secret from me, and freely tells me I must for ever remain ignorant of it; when an artful woman would try to set my mind at rest with some shallow fiction invented to deceive me? Heaven bless her! no doubt of her shall ever darken my life again, come what may."

It was easy for Mr. Mellish to make this mental vow, believing fully that the storm was past, and that lasting fair weather had set in.

"Lolly darling," he said, winding his great arm round his wife's waist, "I thought I had lost you."

She looked up at him with a sad smile.

"Would it grieve you much, John," she said in a low voice, "if you were really to lose me?"

He started as if he had been struck, and looked anxiously at her pale face.

"Would it grieve me, Lolly!" he repeated; "not for long; for the people who came to your funeral would come to mine. But, my darling, my darling, what can have made you ask this question? Are you ill, dearest? You have been

looking pale and tired for the last few days, and I have thought nothing of it. What a careless wretch I am!"

"No, no, John," she said; "I don't mean that. I know you would grieve, dear, if I were to die. But suppose something were to happen which would separate us for ever,—something which would compel me to leave this place never to return to it,—what then?"

"What then, Lolly?" answered her husband gravely. "I would rather see your coffin laid in the empty niche beside my mother's in the vault yonder,"—he pointed in the direction of the parish church, which was close to the gates of the park, —"than I would part with you thus. I would rather know you to be dead and happy than I would endure any doubt about your fate. Oh, my darling, why do you speak of these things? I couldn't part with you—I couldn't! I would rather take you in my arms and plunge with you into the pond in the wood; I would rather send a bullet into your heart, and see you lying murdered at my feet."

"John, John, my dearest and truest!" she said, her face lighting up with a new brightness, like

the sudden breaking of the sun through a leaden cloud, "not another word, dear: we will never part. Why should we? There is very little upon this wide earth that money cannot buy; and it shall help to buy our happiness. We will never part, darling; never."

She broke into a joyous laugh as she watched his anxious, half-wondering face.

"Why, you foolish John, how frightened you look!" she said. "Haven't you discovered yet that I like to torment you now and then with such questions as these, just to see your big blue eyes open to their widest extent? Come, dear; Mrs. Powell will look white thunder at us when we go in, and make some meek conventional reply to our apologies for this delay, to the effect that she doesn't care in the least how long she waits for dinner, and that on the whole she would rather never have any dinner at all. Isn't it strange, John, how that woman hates me?"

"Hates *you*, dear, when you're so kind to her!"

"But she hates me for being kind to her, John. If I were to give her my diamond-necklace, she'd hate me for having it to give. She hates us because we're rich and young and handsome," said

Aurora, laughing; "and the very opposite of her namby-pamby, pale-faced self."

It was strange that from this moment Aurora seemed to regain her natural gaiety of spirits, and to be what she had been before the receipt of Mr. Pastern's letter. Whatever dark cloud had hovered over her head, since the day upon which that simple epistle had caused such a terrible effect, seemed to have been suddenly removed. Mrs. Walter Powell was not slow to perceive this change. The eyes of love, clear-sighted though they may be, are dull indeed beside the eyes of hate. *Those* are never deceived. Aurora had wandered out of the drawing-room, listless and dispirited, to stroll wearily upon the lawn;—Mrs. Powell, seated in one of the windows, had watched her every movement, and had seen her in the distance speaking to some one (she had been unable to distinguish the "Softy" from her post of observation);—and this same Aurora returned to the house almost another creature. There was a look of determination about the beautiful mouth (which female critics called too wide), a look not usual to the rosy lips, and a resolute brightness in the eyes, which had some significance surely, Mrs.

Powell thought, if she could only have found the key to that hidden meaning. Ever since Aurora's brief illness, the poor woman had been groping for this key—groping in mazy darknesses which baffled her utmost powers of penetration. Who and what was this groom, that Aurora should write to him, as she most decidedly had written? Why was he to express no surprise, and what cause could there be for his expressing any surprise in the simple economy of Mellish Park? The mazy darknesses were more impenetrable than the blackest night, and Mrs. Powell wellnigh gave up all hope of ever finding any clue to the mystery. And now behold a new complication had arisen in Aurora's altered spirits. John Mellish was delighted with this alteration. He talked and laughed until the glasses near him vibrated with his noisy mirth. He drank so much sparkling Moselle that his butler Jarvis (who had grown gray in the service of the old squire, and had poured out Master John's first glass of champagne) refused at last to furnish him with any more of that beverage; offering him in its stead some very expensive hock, the name of which was in fourteen unpronounceable syllables, and which John tried to like, but didn't.

"We'll fill the house with visitors for the shooting season, Lolly, darling," said Mr. Mellish. "If they come on the 1st of September, they'll all be comfortably settled for the Leger. The dear old Dad will come of course, and trot about on his white pony like the best of men and bankers in Christendom. Captain and Mrs. Bulstrode will come too; and we shall see how our little Lucy looks, and whether solemn Talbot beats her in the silence of the matrimonial chamber. Then there's Hunter, and a host of fellows; and you must write me a list of any nice people you'd like to ask down here; and we'll have a glorious autumn; won't we, Lolly?"

"I hope so, dear," said Mrs. Mellish, after a little pause, and a repetition of John's eager question. She had not been listening very attentively to John's plans for the future, and she startled him rather by asking him a question very wide from the subject upon which he had been speaking.

"How long do the fastest vessels take going to Australia, John?" she asked quietly.

Mr. Mellish stopped with his glass in his hand to stare at his wife as she asked this question.

"How long do the fastest vessels take to go to Australia?" he repeated. "Good gracious me, Lolly, how should I know? Three weeks or a month—no, I mean three months; but, in mercy's name, Aurora, why do you want to know?"

"The average length of the voyage is, I believe, about three months; but some fast-sailing packets do it in seventy, or even in sixty-eight days," interposed Mrs. Powell, looking sharply at Aurora's abstracted face from under cover of her white eyelashes.

"But why, in goodness name, do you want to know, Lolly?" repeated John Mellish. "You don't want to go to Australia, and you don't know anybody who's going to Australia."

"Perhaps Mrs. Mellish is interested in the Female Emigration movement," suggested Mrs. Powell: "it is a most delightful work."

Aurora replied neither to the direct nor the indirect question. The cloth had been removed (for no modern customs had ever disturbed the conservative economy of Mellish Park), and Mrs. Mellish sat, with a cluster of pale cherries in her hand, looking at the reflection of her own face in the depths of the shining mahogany.

"Lolly!" exclaimed John Mellish, after watching his wife for some minutes, "you are as grave as a judge. What can you be thinking of?"

She looked up at him with a bright smile, and rose to leave the dining-room.

"I'll tell you one of these days, John," she said. "Are you coming with us, or are you going out upon the lawn to smoke?"

"If you'll come with me, dear," he answered, returning her smile with the frank glance of unchangeable affection which always beamed in his eyes when they rested on his wife. "I'll go out and smoke a cigar, if you'll come with me, Lolly."

"You foolish old Yorkshireman," said Mrs. Mellish, laughing, "I verily believe you'd like me to smoke one of your choice cigars, by way of keeping you company."

"No, darling, I'd never wish to see you do anything that didn't square—that wasn't compatible," interposed Mr. Mellish, gravely, "with the manners of the noblest lady, and the duties of the truest wife in England. If I love to see you ride across country with a red feather in your hat, it is because I think that the good old sport of

English gentlemen was meant to be shared by their wives, rather than by people whom I would not like to name; and because there is a fair chance that the sight of your Spanish hat and scarlet plume at the meet may go some way towards keeping Miss Wilhelmina de Lancy (who was born plain Scroggins, and christened Sarah) out of the field. I think our British wives and mothers might have the battle in their own hands, and win the victory for themselves and their daughters, if they were a little braver in standing to their ground; if they were not quite so tenderly indulgent to the sins of eligible young noblemen, and, in their estimate of a man's qualifications for the marriage state, were not so entirely guided by the figures in his banker's book. It's a sad world, Lolly; but John Mellish, of Mellish Park, was never meant to set it right."

Mr. Mellish stood on the threshold of a glass-door which opened on to a flight of steps leading to the lawn, as he delivered himself of this homily, the gravity of which was quite at variance with the usual tenour of his discourse. He had a cigar in his hand, and was going to light it, when Aurora stopped him.

"John, dear," she said, "my most unbusiness-like of darlings, have you forgotten that poor Langley is so anxious to see you, that he may give you up the old accounts before the new trainer takes the stable business into his hands? He was here half an hour before dinner, and begged that you would see him to-night."

Mr. Mellish shrugged his shoulders.

"Langley's as honest a fellow as ever breathed," he said. "I don't want to look into his accounts. I know what the stable costs me yearly on an average, and that's enough."

"But for his satisfaction, dear."

"Well, well, Lolly, to-morrow morning, then."

"No, dear, I want you to ride out with me to-morrow."

"To-morrow evening."

"You 'meet the Captains at the Citadel,'" said Aurora, laughing; "that is to say, you dine at Holmbush with Colonel Pevensey. Come, darling, I insist on your being business-like for once in a way; come to your sanctum sanctorum, and we'll send for Langley, and look into the accounts."

The pretty tyrant linked her arm in his, and led him to the other end of the house, and into

that very room in which she had swooned away at the hearing of Mr. Pastern's letter. She looked thoughtfully out at the dull evening sky as she closed the windows. The storm had not yet come, but the ominous clouds still brooded low over the earth, and the sultry atmosphere was heavy and airless. Mrs. Mellish made a wonderful show of her business habits, and appeared to be very much interested in the mass of cornchandlers,' veterinary surgeons', saddlers', and harness-makers' accounts with which the old trainer respectfully bewildered his master. But about ten minutes after John had settled himself to his weary labour, Aurora threw down the pencil with which she had been working a calculation (by a process of so wildly original a nature, as to utterly revolutionize Cocker, and annihilate the hackneyed notion that twice two are four), and floated lightly out of the room, with some vague promise of coming back presently, leaving Mr. Mellish to arithmetic and despair.

Mrs. Walter Powell was seated in the drawing-room reading, when Aurora entered that apartment with a large black-lace shawl wrapped about her head and shoulders. Mrs. Mellish had evi-

dently expected to find the room empty; for she started and drew back at the sight of the pale-faced widow, who was seated in a distant window, making the most of the last faint rays of summer twilight. Aurora paused for a moment a few paces within the door, and then walked deliberately across the room towards the furthest window from that at which Mrs. Powell was seated.

"Are you going out in the garden this dull evening, Mrs. Mellish?" asked the ensign's widow.

Aurora stopped half-way between the window and the door to answer her.

"Yes," she said coldly.

"Allow me to advise you not to go far. We are going to have a storm."

"I don't think so."

"What, my dear Mrs. Mellish, not with that thunder-cloud yonder?"

"I will take my chance of being caught in it, then. The weather has been threatening all the afternoon. The house is insupportable to-night."

"But you will surely not go far?"

Mrs. Mellish did not appear to hear this last remonstrance. She hurried through the open window, and out upon the lawn, striking north-

wards towards that little iron gate across which she had talked to the "Softy."

The arch of the leaden sky seemed to contract above the tree-tops in the park, shutting in the earth as if with a roof of hot iron, after the fashion of those cunningly-contrived metal torture-chambers which we read of; but the rain had not yet come.

"What can take her into the garden on such an evening as this?" thought Mrs. Powell, as she watched the white dress receding in the dusky twilight. "It will be dark in ten minutes, and she is not usually so fond of going out alone."

The ensign's widow laid down the book in which she had appeared so deeply interested, and went to her own room, where she selected a comfortable gray cloak from a heap of primly folded garments in her capacious wardrobe. She muffled herself in this cloak, hurried down stairs with a soft but rapid step, and went out into the garden through a little lobby near John Mellish's room. The blinds in the squire's sanctum were not drawn down, and Mrs. Powell could see the master of the house bending over his paper under the light of a reading lamp, with the rheumatic trainer seated

by his side. It was by this time quite dark, but Aurora's white dress was faintly visible upon the other side of the lawn.

Mrs. Mellish was standing beside the little iron gate when the ensign's widow emerged from the house. The white dress was motionless for some time, and the pale watcher, lurking under the shade of a long verandah, began to think that her trouble was wasted, and that perhaps, after all, Aurora had no special purpose in this evening ramble.

Mrs. Walter Powell felt cruelly disappointed. Always on the watch for some clue to the secret whose existence she had discovered, she had fondly hoped that even this unseasonable ramble might be some link in the mysterious chain she was so anxious to fit together. But it appeared that she was mistaken. The unseasonable ramble was very likely nothing more than one of Aurora's caprices —a womanly foolishness signifying nothing.

No! The white dress was no longer motionless, and in the unnatural stillness of the hot night Mrs. Powell heard the distant scrooping noise of a hinge revolving slowly, as if guided by a cautious hand. Mrs. Mellish had opened the iron gate,

and had passed to the other side of the invisible barrier which separated the gardens from the Park. In another moment she had disappeared under the shadow of the trees which made a belt about the lawn.

Mrs. Powell paused, almost terrified by her unlooked-for discovery.

What, in the name of all that was darkly mysterious, could Mrs. Mellish have to do between nine and ten o'clock on the north side of the Park —the wildly kept, deserted north side, in which, from year's end to year's end, no one but the keepers ever walked?

The blood rushed hotly up to Mrs. Powell's pale face, as she suddenly remembered that the disused, dilapidated lodge upon this north side had been given to the new trainer as a residence. Remembering this was nothing, but remembering this in connection with that mysterious letter signed "A." was enough to send a thrill of savage, horrible joy through the dull veins of the dependent. What should she do? Follow Mrs. Mellish, and discover where she was going? How far would this be a safe thing to attempt?

She turned back and looked once more through

the window of John's room. He was still bending over the papers, still in as apparently hopeless confusion of mind. There seemed little chance of his business being finished very quickly. The starless night and her dark dress alike sheltered the spy from observation.

"If I were close behind her, she would never see me," she thought.

She struck across the lawn to the iron gate and passed into the Park. The brambles and the tangled undergrowth caught at her dress as she paused for a moment looking about her in the summer night.

There was no trace of Aurora's white figure among the leafy alleys stretching in wild disorder before her.

"I'll not attempt to find the path she took," thought Mrs. Powell; "I know where to find her."

She groped her way into the narrow footpath leading to the lodge. She was not sufficiently familiar with the place to take the short cut which the "Softy" had made for himself through the grass that afternoon, and she was some time walking from the iron gate to the lodge.

The front windows of this rustic lodge faced a road that led to the stables; the back of the building looked towards the path down which Mrs. Powell went, and the two small windows in this back wall were both dark.

The ensign's widow crept softly round to the front, looked about her cautiously, and listened. There was no sound but the occasional rustle of a leaf, tremulous even in the still atmosphere, as if by some internal prescience of the coming storm. With a slow, careful footstep, she stole towards the little rustic window and looked into the room within.

She had not been mistaken when she had said that she knew where to find Aurora.

Mrs. Mellish was standing with her back to the window. Exactly opposite to her sat James Conyers the trainer, in an easy attitude, and with his pipe in his mouth. The little table was between them, and the one candle which lighted the room was drawn close to Mr. Conyers's elbow, and had evidently been used by him for the lighting of his pipe. Aurora was speaking. The eager listener could hear her voice, but not her words; and she could see by the trainer's face

that he was listening intently. He was listening intently, but a dark frown contracted his handsome eyebrows, and it was very evident that he was not too well satisfied with the bent of the conversation.

He looked up when Aurora ceased speaking, shrugged his shoulders, and took his pipe out of his mouth. Mrs. Powell, with her pale face close against the window-pane, watched him intently.

He pointed with a careless gesture to an empty chair near Aurora, but she shook her head contemptuously, and suddenly turned towards the window; so suddenly, that Mrs. Powell had scarcely time to recoil into the darkness before Aurora had unfastened the iron latch and flung the narrow casement open.

"I cannot endure this intolerable heat," she exclaimed, impatiently; "I have said all I have to say, and need only wait for your answer."

"You don't give me much time for consideration," he said, with an insolent coolness which was in strange contrast to the restless vehemence of her manner. "What sort of answer do you want?"

"Yes or No."

"Nothing more?"

"No, nothing more. You know my conditions; they are all written here," she added, putting her hand upon an open paper which lay upon the table; "they are all written clearly enough for a child to understand. Will you accept them? Yes or No?"

"That depends upon circumstances," he answered, filling his pipe, and looking admiringly at the nail of his little finger, as he pressed the tobacco into the bowl.

"Upon what circumstances?"

"Upon the inducement which you offer, my dear Mrs. Mellish."

"You mean the price?"

"That's a low expression," he said, laughing; "but I suppose we both mean the same thing. The inducement must be a strong one which will make me do all that,"—he pointed to the written paper,—"and it must take the form of solid cash. How much is it to be?"

"That is for you to say. Remember what I have told you. Decline to-night and I telegraph to my father to-morrow morning, telling him to alter his will."

"Suppose the old gentleman should be carried

off in the interim, and leave that pleasant sheet of parchment standing as it is. I hear that he's old and feeble; it might be worth while calculating the odds upon such an event. I've risked my money on a worse chance before to-night."

She turned upon him with so dark a frown as he said this, that the insolently heartless words died upon his lips and left him looking at her gravely.

"Egad," he said, "you're as great a devil as ever you were. I doubt if that isn't a good offer after all. Give me two thousand down, and I'll take it."

"Two thousand pounds!"

"I ought to have said twenty, but I've always stood in my own light."

Mrs. Powell, crouching down beneath the open casement, had heard every word of this brief dialogue; but at this juncture, half-forgetful of all danger in her eagerness to listen, she raised her head until it was nearly on a level with the window-sill. As she did so, she recoiled with a sudden thrill of terror. She felt a puff of hot breath upon her cheek, and the garments of a man rustling against her own.

She was not the only listener.

The second spy was Stephen Hargraves the "Softy."

"Hush!" he whispered, grasping Mrs. Powell by the wrist, and pinning her in her crouching attitude by the muscular force of his horny hand; "it's only me; Steeve the 'Softy,' you know; the stable-helper that *she*" (he hissed out the personal pronoun with such a furious impetus that it seemed to whistle sharply through the stillness),—"the fondy that she horsewhipped. I know you, and I know you're here to listen. He sent me into Doncaster to fetch this" (he pointed to a bottle under his arm); "he thought it would take me four or five hours to go and get back; but I ran all the way, for I knew there was soommat oop."

He wiped his streaming face with the ends of his coarse neckerchief as he finished speaking. His breath came in panting gasps, and Mrs. Powell could hear the laborious beating of his heart in the stillness.

"I won't tell o' you," he said, "and you won't tell o' me. I've got the stripes upon my shoulder where she cut me with the whip to this day. I

look at 'em sometimes, and they help to keep me in mind. She's a fine madam, aint she, and a great lady too? Ay, sure she is; but she comes to meet her husband's servant on the sly, after dark, for all that. Maybe the day isn't far off when *she'll* be turned from these gates, and warned off this ground; and the merciful Lord send that I live to see it. Hush!"

With her wrist still pinioned in his strong grasp, he motioned her to be silent, and bent his pale face forward; every feature rigid, in the listening expectancy of his hungry gaze.

"Listen," he whispered; "listen! Every fresh word damns her deeper than the last."

The trainer was the first to speak after this pause in the dialogue within the cottage. He had quietly smoked out his pipe, and had emptied the ashes of his tobacco upon the table before he took up the thread of the conversation at the point at which he had dropped it.

"Two thousand pounds," he said, "that is the offer, and I think it ought to be taken freely. Two thousand down, in Bank-of-England notes (fives and tens, higher figures might be awkward), or sterling coin of the realm. You understand; two

thousand down. That's *my* alternative; or I leave this place to-morrow morning—with all belonging to me."

"By which course you would get nothing," said Mrs. John Mellish, quietly.

"Shouldn't I? What does the chap in the play get for his trouble when the blackamoor smothers his wife? I should get nothing—but my revenge upon a tiger-cat, whose claws have left a mark upon me that I shall carry to my grave." He lifted his hair with a careless gesture of his hand, and pointed to a scar upon his forehead, a white mark, barely visible in the dim light of the tallow-candle. "I'm a good-natured, easy-going fellow, Mrs. John Mellish, but I don't forget. Is it to be the two thousand pounds, or war to the knife?"

Mrs. Powell waited eagerly for Aurora's answer; but before it came, a round heavy raindrop pattered upon the light hair of the ensign's widow. The hood of her cloak had fallen back, leaving her head uncovered. This one large drop was the warning of the coming storm. The signal peal of thunder rumbled slowly and hoarsely in the distance, and a pale flash of

lightning trembled on the white faces of the two listeners.

"Let me go," whispered Mrs. Powell, "let me go; I must get back to the house before the rain begins."

The "Softy" slowly relaxed his iron grip upon her wrist. He had held it unconsciously, in his utter abstraction to all things except the two speakers in the cottage.

Mrs. Powell rose from her knees, and crept noiselessly away from the lodge. She remembered the vital necessity of getting back to the house before Aurora, and of avoiding the shower. Her wet garments would betray her if she did not succeed in escaping the coming storm. She was of a spare, wizen figure, encumbered with no superfluous flesh, and she ran rapidly along the narrow sheltered pathway leading to the iron gate through which she had followed Aurora.

The heavy rain-drops fell at long intervals upon the leaves. A second and a third peal of thunder rattled along the earth, like the horrible roar of some hungry animal creeping nearer and nearer to its prey. Blue flashes of faint lightning lit up the tangled intricacies of the wood, but

the fullest fury of the storm had not yet burst forth.

The rain-drops came at shorter intervals as Mrs. Powell passed out of the wood, through the little iron gate; faster still as she hurried across the lawn; faster yet as she reached the lobby-door, which she had left ajar an hour before, and sat down panting upon a little bench within, to recover her breath before she went any further. She was still sitting on this bench, when the fourth peal of thunder shook the low roof above her head, and the rain dropped from the starless sky with such a rushing impetus, that it seemed as if a huge trap-door had been opened in the heavens, and a celestial ocean let down to flood the earth.

"I think my lady will be nicely caught," muttered Mrs. Walter Powell.

She threw her cloak aside upon the lobby bench, and went through a passage leading to the hall. One of the servants was shutting the hall-door.

"Have you shut the drawing-room windows, Wilson?" she asked.

"No, ma'am; I am afraid Mrs. Mellish is out

in the rain. Jarvis is getting ready to go and look for her, with a lantern and the gig-umbrella."

"Then Jarvis can stop where he is; Mrs. Mellish came in half an hour ago. You may shut all the windows, and close the house for the night."

"Yes, ma'am."

"By-the-by, what o'clock is it, Wilson? My watch is slow."

"A quarter past ten, ma'am, by the dining-room clock."

The man locked the hall-door, put up an immense iron bar, which worked with some rather complicated machinery, and had a bell hanging at one end of it, for the frustration of all burglarious and designing ruffians.

From the hall the man went to the drawing-room, where he carefully fastened the long range of windows; from the drawing-room to the lobby; and from the lobby to the dining-room, where he locked the half-glass door opening into the garden. This being done, all communication between the house and the garden was securely shut off.

"He shall know of her goings-on, at any rate," thought Mrs. Powell, as she dogged the footsteps of the servant to see that he did his work. The

Mellish household did not take very kindly to this deputy mistress; and when the footman went back to the servants' hall, he informed his colleagues that SHE was pryin' and pokin' about sharper than hever, and watchin' of a feller like a old 'ouse-cat. Mr. Wilson was a cockney, and had been newly-imported into the establishment.

When the ensign's widow had seen the last bolt driven home to its socket, and the last key turned in its lock, she went back to the drawing-room and seated herself at the lamp-lit table, with some delicate morsel of old-maidish fancy-work, which seemed to be the converse of Penelope's embroidery, as it appeared to advance at night, and retrograde by day. She had hastily smoothed her hair and rearranged her dress, and she looked as uncomfortably neat as when she came down to breakfast in the fresh primness of her matutinal toilette.

She had been sitting at her work for about ten minutes when John Mellish entered the room, emerging weary but triumphant from his struggle with the simple rules of multiplication and subtraction. Mr. Mellish had evidently suffered severely in the contest. His thick brown hair

was tumbled into a rough mass that stood nearly upright upon his head, his cravat was untied, and his shirt-collar thrown open for the relief of his capacious throat; and these and many other marks of the struggle he bore upon him when he entered the drawing-room.

"I've broken loose from school at last, Mrs. Powell," he said, flinging his big frame upon one of the sofas, to the imminent peril of the German-spring cushions; "I've broken away before the flag dropped, for Langley would have liked to keep me there till midnight. He followed me to the door of this room with fourteen bushels of oats that was down in the cornchandler's account and was not down in the book he keeps to check the cornchandler. Why the deuce don't he put it down in his book and make it right, then, I ask, instead of bothering me? What's the good of his keeping an account to check the cornchandler if he don't make his account the same as the cornchandler's? But it's all over!" he added, with a great sigh of relief, "it's all over! and all I can say is, I hope the new trainer isn't honest."

"Do you know much of the new trainer, Mr. Mellish?" asked Mrs. Powell, blandly; rather as if

she wished to amuse her employer by the exertion of her conversational powers than for the gratification of any mundane curiosity.

"Deuced little," returned John, indifferently. "I haven't even seen the fellow yet; but John Pastern recommended him, and he's sure to be all right; besides, Aurora knows the man: he was in her father's service once."

"Oh, indeed!" said Mrs. Powell, giving the two insignificant words a significant little jerk; "oh, indeed! Mrs. Mellish knows him, does she? Then of course he's a trustworthy person. He's a remarkably handsome young man."

"Remarkably handsome, is he?" said Mr. Mellish, with a careless laugh. "Then I suppose all the maids will be falling in love with him, and neglecting their work to look out of the windows that open on to the stable-yard, hey? That's the sort of thing when a man has a handsome groom, aint it? Susan and Sarah, and all the rest of 'em, take to cleaning the windows, and wearing new ribbons in their caps?"

"I really don't know anything about that, Mr. Mellish," answered the ensign's widow, simpering over her work as if the question they were dis-

cussing was so very far away that it was impossible for her to be serious about it; "but my experience has thrown me into a very large number of families." (She said this with perfect truth, as she had occupied so many situations that her enemies had come to declare she was unable to remain in any one household above a twelvemonth, by reason of her employers' discovery of her real nature.) "I have occupied positions of trust and confidence," continued Mrs. Powell, "and I regret to say that I have seen much domestic misery arise from the employment of handsome servants, whose appearance and manners are superior to their station. Mr. Conyers is not at all the sort of person I should like to see in a household in which I had the charge of young ladies."

A sick, half-shuddering faintness crept through John's herculean frame as Mrs. Powell expressed herself thus; so vague a feeling that he scarcely knew whether it was mental or physical, any better than he knew what it was that he disliked in this speech of the ensign's widow. The feeling was as transient as it was vague. John's honest blue eyes looked wonderingly round the room.

"Where's Aurora?" he said; "gone to bed?"

"I believe Mrs. Mellish has retired to rest," Mrs. Powell answered.

"Then I shall go too. The place is as dull as a dungeon without her," said Mr. Mellish, with agreeable candour. "Perhaps you'll be good enough to make me a glass of brandy-and-water before I go, Mrs. Powell, for I've got the cold shivers after those accounts."

He rose to ring the bell; but before he had gone three paces from the sofa, an impatient knocking at the closed outer shutters of one of the windows arrested his footsteps.

"Who, in mercy's name, is that?" he exclaimed, staring at the direction from which the noise came, but not attempting to respond to the summons.

Mrs. Powell looked up to listen, with a face expressive of nothing but innocent wonder.

The knocking was repeated more loudly and impatiently than before.

"It must be one of the servants," muttered John; "but why doesn't he go round to the back of the house? I can't keep the poor devil out upon such a night as this, though," he added

good-naturedly,' unfastening the window as he spoke. The sashes opened inwards, the Venetian shutters outwards. He pushed these shutters open, and looked out into the darkness and the rain.

Aurora, shivering in her drenched garments, stood a few paces from him, with the rain beating down straight and heavily upon her head.

Even in that obscurity her husband recognized her.

"My darling," he cried, "is it you? You out at such a time, and on such a night! Come in, for mercy's sake; you must be drenched to the skin."

She came into the room; the wet hanging in her muslin dress streamed out upon the carpet on which she trod, and the folds of her lace shawl clung tightly about her figure.

"Why did you let them shut the windows?" she said, turning to Mrs. Powell, who had risen, and was looking the picture of ladylike uneasiness and sympathy. "You knew that I was in the garden."

"Yes, but I thought you had returned, my dear Mrs. Mellish," said the ensign's widow, busying

herself with Aurora's wet shawl, which she attempted to remove, but which Mrs. Mellish plucked impatiently away from her. "I saw you go out, certainly; and I saw you leave the lawn in the direction of the north lodge; but I thought you had returned some time since."

The colour faded out of John Mellish's face.

"The north lodge!" he said. "Have you been to the north lodge?"

"I have been in the *direction of the north lodge*," Aurora answered, with a sneering emphasis upon the words. "Your information is perfectly correct, Mrs. Powell, though I did not know you had done me the honour of watching my actions."

Mr. Mellish did not appear to hear this. He looked from his wife to his wife's companion with a half-bewildered expression—an expression of newly-awakened doubt, of dim, struggling perplexity—that was very painful to see.

"The north lodge!" he repeated; "what were you doing at the north lodge, Aurora?"

"Do you wish me to stand here in my wet clothes while I tell you?" asked Mrs. Mellish, her great black eyes blazing up with indignant pride. "If you want an explanation for Mrs.

Powell's satisfaction, I can give it here; if only for your own, it will do as well upstairs."

She swept towards the door, trailing her wet shawl after her, but not less queenly, even in her dripping garments; Semiramide and Cleopatra may have been out in wet weather. On the threshold of the door she paused and looked back at her husband.

"I shall want you to take me to London to-morrow, Mr. Mellish," she said. Then with one haughty toss of her beautiful head, and one bright flash of her glorious eyes, which seemed to say, "Slave, obey and tremble!" she disappeared, leaving Mr. Mellish to follow her, meekly, wonderingly, fearfully; with terrible doubts and anxieties creeping, like venomous living creatures, stealthily into his heart.

CHAPTER VI.

MONEY MATTERS.

Archibald Floyd was very lonely at Felden Woods without his daughter. He took no pleasure in the long drawing-room, or the billiard-room and library, or the pleasant galleries, in which there were all manner of easy corners, with abutting bay-windows, damask-cushioned oaken benches, china vases as high as tables, all enlivened by the alternately sternly masculine and simperingly feminine faces of those ancestors whose painted representations the banker had bought in Wardour Street. (Indeed, I fear those Scottish warriors, those bewigged worthies of the Northern Circuit, those taper-waisted ladies with pointed stomachers, tucked-up petticoats, pannier-hoops, and blue-ribbon bedizened crooks, had been painted to order, and that there were such items in the account of the Wardour Street *rococo* merchant

as, "To one knight banneret, killed at Bosworth 25*l.* 5*s.*") The old banker, I say, grew sadly weary of his gorgeous mansion, which was of little avail to him without Aurora.

People are not so very much happier for living in handome houses, though it is generally considered such a delightful thing to occupy a mansion which would be large enough for a hospital, and take your simple meal at the end of a table long enough to accommodate a board of railway directors. Archibald Floyd could not sit beside both the fireplaces in his long drawing-room, and he felt strangely lonely looking from the easy-chair on one hearth-rug, through a vista of velvet-pile and satin-damask, walnut-wood, buhl, malachite, china, parian, crystal, and ormolu, at that solitary second hearth-rug and those empty easy-chairs. He shivered in his dreary grandeur. His five-and-forty by thirty feet of velvet-pile might have been a patch of yellow sand in the Great Sahara for any pleasure he derived from its occupation. The billiard-room, perhaps, was worse; for the cues and balls were every one made precious by Aurora's touch; and there was a great fine-drawn seam upon the green cloth, which

marked the spot where Miss Floyd had ripped it open that time she made her first juvenile essay at a cannon.

The banker locked the doors of both these splendid apartments, and gave the keys to his housekeeper.

"Keep the rooms in order, Mrs. Richardson," he said, "and keep them thoroughly aired; but I shall only use them when Mr. and Mrs. Mellish come to me."

And having shut up these haunted chambers, Mr. Floyd retired to that snug little study in which he kept his few relics of the sorrowful past.

It may be said that the Scottish banker was a very stupid old man, and that he might have invited the county families to his gorgeous mansion; that he might have summoned his nephews and their wives, with all grand nephews and nieces appertaining, and might thus have made the place merry with the sound of fresh young voices, and the long corridors noisy with the patter of restless little feet. He might have lured literary and artistic celebrities to his lonely hearth-rug, and paraded the lions of the London season upon

his velvet-pile. He might have entered the political arena, and have had himself nominated for Beckenham, Croydon, or West Wickham. He might have done almost anything; for he had very nearly as much money as Aladdin, and could have carried dishes of uncut diamonds to the father of any princess whom he might take it into his head to marry. He might have done almost anything, this ridiculous old banker; yet he did nothing but sit brooding over his lonely hearth—for he was old and feeble, and he sat by the fire even in the bright summer weather—thinking of the daughter who was far away.

He thanked God for her happy home, for her devoted husband, for her secure and honourable position; and he would have given the last drop of his blood to obtain for her these advantages; but he was, after all, only mortal, and he would rather have had her by his side.

Why did he not surround himself with society, as brisk Mrs. Alexander urged, when she found him looking pale and care-worn?

Why? Because society was not Aurora. Because all the brightest *bon-mots* of all the literary celebrities who have ever walked this earth

seemed dull to him when compared with his daughter's idlest babble. Literary lions! Political notabilities! Out upon them! When Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton and Mr. Charles Dickens should call in Mr. Makepeace Thackeray and Mr. Wilkie Collins, to assist them in writing a work, in fifteen volumes or so, about Aurora, the banker would be ready to offer them a handsome sum for the copyright. Until then, he cared very little for the best book in Mr. Mudie's collection. When the members of the legislature should bring their political knowledge to bear upon Aurora, Mr. Archibald Floyd would be happy to listen to them. In the interim, he would have yawned in Lord Palmerston's face or turned his back upon Earl Russell.

The banker had been a kind uncle, a good master, a warm friend, and a generous patron; but he had never loved any creature except his wife Eliza and the daughter she had left to his care. Life is not long enough to hold many such attachments as these; and the people who love very intensely are apt to concentrate the full force of their affection upon one object. For twenty years this black-eyed girl had been the idol before

which the old man had knelt; and now that the divinity is taken away from him, he falls prostrate and desolate before the empty shrine. Heaven knows how bitterly this beloved child had made him suffer, how deeply she had plunged the reckless dagger to the very core of his loving heart, and how freely, gladly, tearfully, and hopefully he had forgiven her. But she had never atoned for the past. It is poor consolation which Lady Macbeth gives to her remorseful husband when she tells him that "what's done cannot be undone;" but it is painfully and terribly true. Aurora could not restore the year which she had taken out of her father's life, and which his anguish and despair had multiplied by ten. She could not restore the equal balance of the mind which had once experienced a shock so dreadful as to shatter its serenity, as we shatter the mechanism of a watch when we let it fall violently to the ground. The watchmaker patches up the damage, and gives us a new wheel here, and a spring there, and sets the hands going again; but they never go so smoothly as when the watch was fresh from the hands of the maker, and they are apt to stop suddenly with no shadow of warning.

Aurora could not atone. Whatever the nature of that girlish error which made the mystery of her life, it was not to be undone. She could more easily have baled the ocean dry with a soup-ladle, —and I dare say she would gladly have gone to work to spoon out the salt water, if by so doing she could have undone that bygone mischief. But she could not; she could not! Her tears, her penitence, her affection, her respect, her devotion, could do much; but they could not do this.

The old banker invited Talbot Bulstrode and his young wife to make themselves at home at Felden, and drive down to the Woods as freely as if the place had been some country mansion of their own. They came sometimes, and Talbot entertained his great uncle-in-law with the troubles of the Cornish miners, while Lucy sat listening to her husband's talk with unmitigated reverence and delight. Archibald Floyd made his guests very welcome upon these occasions, and gave orders that the oldest and costliest wines in the cellar should be brought out for the captain's entertainment, but sometimes in the very middle of Talbot's discourses upon political economy the

old man would sigh wearily, and look with a dimly yearning gaze far away over the tree-tops in a northward direction, towards that distant Yorkshire household in which his daughter was the queen.

Perhaps Mr. Floyd had never quite forgiven Talbot Bulstrode for the breaking off of the match between him and Aurora. The banker had certainly of the two suitors preferred John Mellish; but he would have considered it only correct if Captain Bulstrode had retired from the world upon the occasion of Aurora's marriage, and broken his heart in foreign exile, rather than advertising his indifference by a union with poor little Lucy. Archibald looked wonderingly at his fair-haired niece, as she sat before him in the deep bay-window, with the sunshine upon her amber tresses and the crisp folds of her peach-coloured dress, looking for all the world like one of the painted heroines so dear to the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, and marvelled how it was that Talbot could have come to admire her. She was very pretty, certainly, with pink cheeks, a white nose, and rose-coloured nostrils, and a species of beauty which consists in very careful finishing off and picking

out of the features; but, oh, how tame, how cold, how weak, beside that Egyptian goddess, that Assyrian queen with the flashing eyes and the serpentine coils of purple-black hair!

Talbot Bulstrode was very calm, very quiet, but apparently sufficiently happy. I use that word "sufficiently" advisedly. It is a dangerous thing to be too happy. Your high-pressure happiness, your sixty-miles-an-hour enjoyment, is apt to burst up and come to a bad end. Better the quietest parliamentary train, which starts very early in the morning and carries its passengers safe into the terminus when the shades of night come down, than that rabid, rushing express, which does the journey in a quarter of the time, but occasionally topples over a bank, or rides pickaback upon a luggage train, in its fiery impetuosity.

Talbot Bulstrode was substantially happier with Lucy than he ever could have been with Aurora. His fair young wife's undemonstrative worship of him soothed and flattered him. Her gentle obedience, her entire concurrence in his every thought and whim, set his pride at rest. She was not eccentric, she was not impetuous. If he left her alone all day in the snug little house in Half-

moon Street which he had furnished before his marriage, he had no fear of her calling for her horse and scampering away into Rotten Row, with not so much as a groom to attend upon her. She was not strong-minded. She could be happy without the society of Newfoundlands and Skye terriers. She did not prefer Landseer's dog-pictures above all other examples of modern art. She might have walked down Regent Street a hundred times without being once tempted to loiter upon the curb-stone and bargain with suspicious-looking merchants for a "noice leetle dawg." She was altogether gentle and womanly, and Talbot had no fear to trust her to her own sweet will, and no need to impress upon her the necessity of lending her feeble little hands to the mighty task of sustaining the dignity of the Raleigh Bulstrodes.

She would cling to him sometimes half lovingly, half timidly, and, looking up with a pretty deprecating smile into his coldly handsome face, ask him, falteringly, if he was *really*, REALLY happy.

"Yes, my darling girl," the Cornish captain would answer, being very well accustomed to the question, "decidedly, very happy."

His calm business-like tone would rather disappoint poor Lucy, and she would vaguely wish that her husband had been a little more like the heroes in the High-Church novels, and a little less devoted to Adam Smith, McCulloch, and the Cornish mines.

"But you don't love me as you loved Aurora, Talbot?" (There were profane people who corrupted the captain's Christian name into "Tal;" but Mrs. Bulstrode was not more likely to avail herself of that disrespectful abbreviation than she was to address her gracious Sovereign as "Vic.") "But you don't love me as you loved Aurora, Talbot dear?" the pleading voice would urge, so tenderly anxious to be contradicted.

"Not *as* I loved Aurora, perhaps, darling."

"Not as much?"

"As much and better, my pet; with a more enduring and a wiser love."

If this was a little bit of a fib when the captain first said it, is he to be utterly condemned for the falsehood? How could he resist the loving blue eyes so ready to fill with tears if he had answered coldly; the softly pensive voice, tremulous with emotion; the earnest face; the caressing hand

laid so lightly upon his coat-collar? He must have been more than mortal had he given any but loving answers to those loving questions. The day soon came when his answers were no longer tinged with so much as the shadow of falsehood. His little wife crept stealthily, almost imperceptibly, into his heart; and if he remembered the fever-dream of the past, it was only to rejoice in the tranquil security of the present.

Talbot Bulstrode and his wife were staying at Felden Woods for a few days during the burning July weather, and sat down to dinner with Mr. Floyd upon the day succeeding the night of the storm. They were disturbed in the very midst of that dinner by the unexpected arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Mellish, who rattled up to the door in a hired vehicle just as the second course was being placed upon the table.

Archibald Floyd recognized the first murmur of his daughter's voice, and ran out into the hall to welcome her.

She showed no eagerness to throw herself into her father's arms, but stood looking at John Mellish with a weary, absent expression, while the stalwart Yorkshireman allowed himself to be

gradually disencumbered of a chaotic load of travelling-bags, sun-umbrellas, shawls, magazines, newspapers, and over-coats.

"My darling, my darling!" exclaimed the banker, "what a happy surprise, what an unexpected pleasure!"

She did not answer him, but, with her arms about his neck, looked mournfully into his face.

"She would come," said John Mellish, addressing himself generally; "she would come. The deuce knows why! But she said she must come, and what could I do but bring her? If she asked me to take her to the moon, what could I do but take her? But she wouldn't bring any luggage to speak of, because we're going back to-morrow."

"Going back to-morrow!" repeated Mr. Floyd; "impossible!"

"Bless your heart!" cried John, "what's impossible to Lolly? If she wanted to go to the moon, she'd go, don't I tell you? She'd have a special engine, or a special balloon, or a special something or other, and she'd go. When we were in Paris she wanted to see the big fountains play; and she told me to write to the Emperor and ask him to have them set going for her. She did, by Jove!"

Lucy Bulstrode came forward to bid her cousin welcome; but I fear that a sharp jealous pang thrilled through that innocent heart at the thought that those fatal black eyes were again brought to bear upon Talbot's life.

Mrs. Mellish put her arms about her cousin as tenderly as if she had been embracing a child.

"You here, dearest Lucy!" she said. "I am so very glad!"

"He loves me," whispered little Mrs. Bulstrode, "and I never, never can tell you how good he is."

"Of course not, my darling," answered Aurora, drawing her cousin aside while Mr. Mellish shook hands with his father-in-law and Talbot Bulstrode. "He is the most glorious of princes, the most perfect of saints, is he not? and you worship him all day; you sing silent hymns in his praise, and perform high mass in his honour, and go about telling his virtues upon an imaginary rosary. Ah, Lucy, how many kinds of love there are! and who shall say which is the best or highest? I see plain, blundering John Mellish yonder, with unprejudiced eyes; I know his every fault, I laugh at his every awkwardness. Yes, I laugh now, for

he is dropping those things faster than the servants can pick them up."

She stopped to point to poor John's chaotic burden.

"I see all this as plainly as I see the deficiencies of the servant who stands behind my chair; and yet I love him with all my heart and soul, and I would not have one fault corrected, or one virtue exaggerated, for fear it should make him different to what he is."

Lucy Bulstrode gave a little half-resigned sigh.

"What a blessing that my poor cousin is happy!" she thought; "and yet how can she be otherwise than miserable with that absurd John Mellish?"

What Lucy meant, perhaps, was this:—How could Aurora be otherwise than wretched in the companionship of a gentleman who had neither a straight nose nor dark hair. Some women never outlive that school-girl infatuation for straight noses and dark hair? Some girls would have rejected Napoleon the Great because he wasn't "tall," or would have turned up their noses at the author of 'Childe Harold' if they had happened to see him in a stand-up collar. If Lord Byron

had never turned down his collars, would his poetry have been as popular as it was? If Mr. Alfred Tennyson were to cut his hair, would that operation modify our opinion of 'The Queen of the May'? Where does that marvellous power of association begin and end? Perhaps there may have been a reason for Aurora's contentment with her commonplace, prosaic husband. Perhaps she had learned at a very early period of her life that there are qualities even more valuable than exquisitely-modelled features or clustering locks. Perhaps, having begun to be foolish very early, she had outstripped her contemporaries in the race, and had earlier learned to be wise.

Archibald Floyd led his daughter and her husband into the dining-room, and the dinner-party sat down again with the two unexpected guests, and the luke-warm salmon brought in again for Mr. and Mrs. Mellish.

Aurora sat in her old place on her father's right hand. In the old girlish days Miss Floyd had never occupied the bottom of the table, but had loved best to sit close to that foolishly-doting parent, pouring out his wine for him in defiance of the servants, and doing other loving offices

which were deliciously inconvenient to the old man.

To-day Aurora seemed especially affectionate. That fondly-clinging manner had all its ancient charm to the banker. He put down his glass with a tremulous hand to gaze at his darling child, and was dazzled with her beauty, and drunken with the happiness of having her near him.

"But, my darling," he said, by-and-by, "what do you mean by talking about going back to Yorkshire to-morrow?"

"Nothing, papa, except that I *must* go," answered Mrs. Mellish, determinedly.

"But why come, dear, if you could only stop one night?"

"Because I wanted to see you, dearest father, and talk to you about—about money matters."

"That's it," exclaimed John Mellish, with his mouth half full of salmon and lobster-sauce. "That's it! Money matters! That's all I can get out of her. She goes out late last night, and roams about the garden, and comes in wet through and through, and says she must come to London about money matters. What should she want

with money matters? If she wants money, she can have as much as she wants. She shall write the figures, and I'll sign the cheque; or she shall have a dozen blank cheques to fill in just as she pleases. What is there upon this earth that I'd refuse her? If she dipped a little too deep, and put more money than she could afford upon the bay filly, why doesn't she come to me instead of bothering you about money matters? You know I said so in the train, Aurora, ever so many times. Why bother your poor papa about it?"

The poor papa looked wonderingly from his daughter to his daughter's husband. What did it all mean? Trouble, vexation, weariness of spirit, humiliation, disgrace?

Ah, Heaven help that enfeebled mind whose strength has been shattered by one great shock! Archibald Floyd dreaded the token of a coming storm in every chance cloud on the summer's sky.

"Perhaps I may prefer to spend my *own* money, Mr. John Mellish," answered Aurora, "and pay any foolish bets I have chosen to make out of my *own* purse, without being under an obligation to any one."

Mr. Mellish returned to his salmon in silence.

"There is no occasion for a great mystery, papa," resumed Aurora; "I want some money for a particular purpose, and I have come to consult with you about my affairs. There is nothing very extraordinary in that, I suppose?"

Mrs. John Mellish tossed her head, and flung this sentence at the assembly, as if it had been a challenge. Her manner was so defiant, that even Talbot and Lucy felt called upon to respond with a gentle dissenting murmur.

"No, no, of course not; nothing more natural," muttered the captain; but he was thinking all the time,—"Thank God I married the other one."

After dinner the little party strolled out of the drawing-room windows on to the lawn, and away towards that iron bridge upon which Aurora had stood, with her dog by her side, less than two years ago, on the occasion of Talbot Bulstrode's second visit to Felden Woods. Lingering upon that bridge on this tranquil summer's evening, what could the captain do but think of that September day, barely two years agone? Barely two years! not two years! And how much had been done and thought and suffered since! How con-

temptible was the narrow space of time! yet what terrible eternities of anguish, what centuries of heart-break, had been compressed into that pitiful sum of days and weeks! When the fraudulent partner in some house of business puts the money which is not his own upon a Derby favourite, and goes home at night a loser, it is strangely difficult for that wretched defaulter to believe that it is not twelve hours since he travelled the road to Epsom confident of success, and calculating how he should invest his winnings. Talbot Bulstrode was very silent, thinking of the influence which this family of Felden Woods had had upon his destiny. His little Lucy saw that silence and thoughtfulness, and, stealing softly to her husband, linked her arm in his. She had a right to do it now. Yes, to pass her little soft white hand under his coat-sleeve, and even look up, almost boldly, in his face.

"Do you remember when you first came to Felden, and we stood upon this very bridge?" she asked: for she too had been thinking of that far-away time in the bright September of '57. "Do you remember, Talbot dear?"

She had drawn him away from the banker and

his children, in order to ask this all-important question.

"Yes, perfectly, darling. As well as I remember your graceful figure seated at the piano in the long drawing-room, with the sunshine on your hair."

"You remember that!—you remember *me!*" exclaimed Lucy, rapturously.

"Very well, indeed."

"But I thought—that is, I know—that you were in love with Aurora then."

"I think not."

"You only think not?"

"How can I tell!" cried Talbot. "I freely confess that my first recollection connected with this place is of a gorgeous black-eyed creature, with scarlet in her hair; and I can no more disassociate her image from Felden Woods than I can, with my bare right hand, pluck up the trees which give the place its name. But if you entertain one distrustful thought of that pale shadow of the past, you do yourself and me a grievous wrong. I made a mistake, Lucy; but, thank Heaven! I saw it in time."

It is to be observed that Captain Bulstrode was

always peculiarly demonstrative in his gratitude to Providence for his escape from the bonds which were to have united him to Aurora. He also made a great point of the benign compassion in which he held John Mellish. But in despite of this, he was apt to be rather captious and quarrelsomely disposed towards the Yorkshireman; and I doubt if John's little stupidities and weakness were, on the whole, very displeasing to him. There are some wounds which never quite heal. The jagged flesh may reunite; cooling medicines may subdue the inflammation; even the scar left by the dagger-thrust may wear away, until it disappears in that gradual transformation which every atom of us is supposed by physiologists to undergo; but the wound *has been*, and to the last hour of our lives there are unfavourable winds which can make us wince with the old pain.

Aurora treated her cousin's husband with the calm cordiality which she might have felt for a brother. She bore no grudge against him for the old desertion; for she was happy with her husband. She was happy with the man who loved and believed in her, with a strength of confidence which had survived every trial of his simple faith.

Mrs. Mellish and Lucy wandered away among the flower-beds by the water-side, leaving the gentlemen on the bridge.

"So you are very, very happy, my Lucy?" said Aurora.

"Oh, yes, yes, dear. How could I be otherwise? Talbot is so good to me. I know, of course, that he loved you first, and that he doesn't love me quite—in the same way, you know—perhaps, in fact—not as much." Lucy Bulstrode was never tired of harping on this unfortunate minor string. "But I am very happy. You must come and see us, Aurora dear. Our house is so pretty!"

Mrs. Bulstode hereupon entered into a detailed description of the furniture and decorations in Halfmoon Street, which is perhaps scarcely worthy of record. Aurora listened rather absently to the long catalogue of upholstery, and yawned several times before her cousin had finished.

"It's a very pretty house, I dare say, Lucy," she said at last, "and John and I will be very glad to come and see you some day. I wonder, Lucy, if I were to come in any trouble or disgrace to your door, whether you would turn me away?"

"Trouble! disgrace!" repeated Lucy looking frightened.

"You wouldn't turn me away, Lucy, would you? No; I know you better than that. You'd let me in secretly, and hide me away in one of the servants' bedrooms, and bring me food by stealth, for fear the captain should discover the forbidden guest beneath his roof. You'd serve two masters, Lucy, in fear and trembling."

Before Mrs. Bulstrode could make any answer to this extraordinary speech the approach of the gentlemen interrupted the feminine conference.

It was scarcely a lively evening, this July sunset at Felden Woods. Archibald Floyd's gladness in his daughter's presence was something damped by the peculiarity of her visit; John Mellish had some shadowy remnants of the previous night's disquietude hanging about him; Talbot Bulstrode was thoughtful and moody; and poor little Lucy was tortured by vague fears of her brilliant cousin's influence. I don't suppose that any member of that "attenuated" assembly felt very much regret when the great clock in the stable-yard struck eleven, and the jingling bedroom candlesticks were brought into the room.

Talbot and his wife were the first to say good-night. Aurora lingered at her father's side, and John Mellish looked doubtfully at his dashing white sergeant, waiting to receive the word of command.

"You may go, John," she said; "I want to speak to papa."

"But I can wait, Lolly."

"On no account," answered Mrs. Mellish sharply. "I am going into papa's study to have a quiet confabulation with him. What end would be gained by your waiting? You've been yawning in our faces all the evening. You're tired to death, I know, John; so go at once, my precious pet, and leave papa and me to discuss our money matters." She pouted her rosy lips, and stood upon tiptoe, while the big Yorkshireman kissed her.

"How you do henpeck me, Lolly!" he said rather sheepishly. "Good-night, sir. God bless you! Take care of my darling."

He shook hands with Mr. Floyd, parting from him with that half-affectionate, half-reverent manner which he always displayed to Aurora's father. Mrs. Mellish stood for some moments

silent and motionless, looking after her husband; while her father, watching her looks, tried to read their meaning.

How quiet are the tragedies of real life! That dreadful scene between the Moor and his Ancient takes place in the open street of Cyprus, according to modern usage. I can scarcely fancy Othello and Iago debating about poor Desdemona's honesty in St. Paul's Churchyard, or even in the market-place of a country town; but perhaps the Cyprus street was a dull one, a *cul-de-sac*, it may be, or at least a deserted thoroughfare, something like that in which Monsieur Melnotte falls upon the shoulder of General Damas and sobs out his lamentations. But our modern tragedies seem to occur indoors, and in places where we should least look for scenes of horror. Who can forget that tempestuous scene of jealous fury and mad violence which took place in a second floor in Northumberland Street, while the broad daylight was streaming in through the dusty windows, and the common London cries ascending from the pavement below?

Any chance traveller driving from Beckenham to West Wickham would have looked, perhaps

enviously, at the Felden mansion, and sighed to be lord of that fair expanse of park and garden; yet I doubt if in the county of Kent there was any creature more disturbed in mind than Archibald Floyd the banker. Those few moments during which Aurora stood in thoughtful silence were as so many hours to his anxious mind. At last she spoke.

"Will you come to the study, papa?" she said; "this room is so big, and so dimly lighted. I always fancy there are listeners in the corners."

She did not wait for an answer; but led the way to a room upon the other side of the hall,—the room in which she and her father had been so long closeted together upon the night before her departure for Paris. The crayon portrait of Eliza Floyd looked down upon Archibald and his daughter. The face wore so bright and genial a smile that it was difficult to believe that it was the face of the dead.

The banker was the first to speak.

"My darling girl," he said, "what is it you want with me?"

"Money, papa. Two thousand pounds."

She checked his gesture of surprise, and resumed before he could interrupt her.

"The money you settled upon me on my marriage with John Mellish is invested in our own bank, I know. I know, too, that I can draw upon my account when and how I please; but I thought that if I wrote a cheque for two thousand pounds the unusual amount might attract attention,—and it might possibly fall into your hands. Had this occurred you would perhaps have been alarmed, at any rate astonished. I thought it best, therefore, to come to you myself and ask you for the money, especially as I must have it in notes."

Archibald Floyd grew very pale. He had been standing while Aurora spoke; but as she finished he dropped into a chair near his little office table, and resting his elbow upon an open desk leaned his head on his hand.

"What do you want money for, my dear?" he asked gravely.

"Never mind that, papa. It is my money, is it not; and I may spend it as I please?"

"Certainly, my dear, certainly," he answered, with some slight hesitation. "You shall spend whatever you please. I am rich enough to indulge

any whim of yours, however foolish, however extravagant. But your marriage settlement was rather intended for the benefit of your children—than—than for—anything of this kind; and I scarcely know if you are justified in touching it without your husband's permission; especially as your pin-money is really large enough to enable you to gratify any reasonable wish."

The old man pushed his gray hair away from his forehead with a weary action and a tremulous hand. Heaven knows that even in that desperate moment Aurora took notice of the feeble hand and the whitening hair.

"*Give* me the money, then, papa," she said. "Give it me from your own purse. You are rich enough to do that."

"Rich enough! Yes, if it were twenty times the sum," answered the banker slowly. Then, with a sudden burst of passion, he exclaimed, "O Aurora, Aurora! why do you treat me so badly? Have I been so cruel a father that you can't confide in me? Aurora, why do you want this money?"

She clasped her hands tightly together, and stood looking at him for a few moments irresolutely.

"I cannot tell you," she said, with grave determination. "If I were to tell you—what—what I think of doing, you might thwart me in my purpose. Father! father!" she cried, with a sudden change in her voice and manner, "I am hemmed in on every side by difficulty and danger; and there is only one way of escape—except death. Unless I take that one way, I must die. I am very young,—too young and happy, perhaps, to die willingly. Give me the means of escape."

"You mean this sum of money?"

"Yes."

"You have been pestered by some connection—some old associate of—his?"

"No!"

"What then?"

"I cannot tell you."

They were silent for some moments. Archibald Floyd looked imploringly at his child, but she did not answer that earnest gaze. She stood before him with a proudly downcast look: the eyelids drooping over the dark eyes, not in shame, not in humiliation; only in the stern determination to avoid being subdued by the sight of her father's distress.

"Aurora," he said at last, "why not take the wisest and the safest step? Why not tell John Mellish the truth? The danger would disappear; the difficulty would be overcome. If you are persecuted by this low rabble, who so fit as he to act for you? Tell him, Aurora—tell him all!"

"No, no, no!"

She lifted her hands and clasped them upon her pale face.

"No, no; not for all this wide world!" she cried.

"Aurora," said Archibald Floyd, with a gathering sternness upon his face, which overspread the old man's benevolent countenance like some dark cloud,—"Aurora,—God forgive me for saying such words to my own child,—but I must insist upon your telling me that this is no new infatuation, no new madness, which leads you to——" He was unable to finish his sentence.

Mrs. Mellish dropped her hands from before her face, and looked at him with her eyes flashing fire, and her cheeks in a crimson blaze.

"Father," she cried, "how dare you ask me such a question? New infatuation! New madness! Have I suffered so little, do you think, from the

folly of my youth? Have I paid so small a price for the mistake of my girlhood, that you should have cause to say these words to me to-night? Do I come of so bad a race," she said, pointing indignantly to her mother's portrait, "that you should think so vilely of me? Do I——"

Her tragical appeal was rising to its climax, when she dropped suddenly at her father's feet, and burst into a tempest of sobs.

"Papa, papa, pity me!" she cried; "pity me!"

He raised her in his arms, and drew her to him, and comforted her, as he had comforted her for the loss of a Scotch terrier-pup twelve years before, when she was small enough to sit on his knee, and nestle her head in his waistcoat.

"Pity you, my dear!" he said. "What is there I would not do for you to save you one moment's sorrow? If my worthless life could help you; if——"

"You will give me the money, papa?" she asked, looking up at him half coaxingly through her tears.

"Yes, my darling; to-morrow morning."

"In bank-notes?"

"In any manner you please. But, Aurora, why

see these people? Why listen to their disgraceful demands? Why not tell the truth?"

"Ah, why, indeed!" she said thoughtfully. "Ask me no questions, dear papa; but let me have the money to-morrow, and I promise you that this shall be the very last you hear of my old troubles."

She made this promise with such perfect confidence that her father was inspired with a faint ray of hope.

"Come, darling papa," she said; "your room is near mine; let us go up-stairs together."

She entwined her arm in his, and led him up the broad staircase; only parting from him at the door of his room.

Mr. Floyd summoned his daughter into the study early the next morning, while Talbot Bulstrode was opening his letters, and Lucy strolling up and down the terrace with John Mellish.

"I have telegraphed for the money, my darling," the banker said. "One of the clerks will be here with it by the time we have finished breakfast."

Mr. Floyd was right. A card inscribed with the name of a Mr. George Martin was brought to him during breakfast.

"Mr. Martin will be good enough to wait in my study," he said.

Aurora and her father found the clerk seated at the open window, looking admiringly through festoons of foliage, which clustered round the frame of the lattice, into the richly-cultivated garden. Felden Woods was a sacred spot in the eyes of the junior clerks in Lombard Street, and a drive to Beckenham in a Hansom cab on a fine summer's morning, to say nothing of such chance refreshment as pound-cake and old Madeira, or cold fowl and Scotch ale, was considered no small treat.

Mr. George Martin, who was labouring under the temporary affliction of being only nineteen years of age, rose in a confused flutter of respect and surprise, and blushed very violently at sight of Mrs. Mellish.

Aurora responded to his reverential salute with such a pleasant nod as she might have bestowed upon the younger dogs in the stable-yard, and seated herself opposite to him at the little table by the window. It was such an excruciatingly narrow table that the crisp ribbons about Aurora's muslin dress rustled against the drab trousers of the junior clerk as Mrs. Mellish sat down.

The young man unlocked a little morocco pouch which he wore suspended from a strap across his shoulder, and produced a roll of crisp notes; so crisp, so white and new, that, in their unsullied freshness, they looked more like notes on the Bank of Elegance than the circulating medium of this busy, money-making nation.

"I have brought the cash for which you telegraphed, sir," said the clerk.

"Very good, Mr. Martin," answered the banker. "Here is my cheque ready written for you. The notes are——?"

"Twenty fifties, twenty-five twenties, fifty tens," the clerk said glibly.

Mr. Floyd took the little bundle of tissue-paper, and counted the notes with the professional rapidity which he still retained.

"Quite correct," he said, ringing the bell, which was speedily answered by a simpering footman. "Give this gentleman some lunch. You will find the Madeira very good," he added kindly, turning to the blushing junior; "it's a wine that is dying out; and by the time you're my age, Mr. Martin, you won't be able to get such a glass as I can offer you to-day. Good morning."

Mr. George Martin clutched his hat nervously from the empty chair on which he had placed it, knocked down a heap of papers with his elbow, bowed, blushed, and stumbled out of the room, under convoy of the simpering footman, who nourished a profound contempt for the young men from the "hoffice."

"Now, my darling," said Mr. Floyd, "here is the money. Though, mind, I protest against——"

"No, no, papa, not a word," she interrupted; "I thought that was all settled last night."

He sighed with the same weary sigh as on the night before, and seating himself at his desk, dipped a pen into the ink.

"What are you going to do, papa?"

"I'm only going to take the numbers of the notes."

"There is no occasion."

"There is always occasion to be business-like," said the old man firmly, as he checked the numbers of the notes one by one upon a sheet of paper with rapid precision.

Aurora paced up and down the room impatiently while this operation was going forward.

"How difficult it has been to me to get this

money!" she exclaimed. "If I had been the wife and daughter of two of the poorest men in Christendom, I could scarcely have had more trouble about this two thousand pounds. And now you keep me here while you number the notes, not one of which is likely to be exchanged in this country."

"I learnt to be business-like when I was very young, Aurora," answered Mr. Floyd, "and I have never been able to forget my old habits."

He completed his task in defiance of his daughter's impatience, and handed her the packet of notes when he had done.

"I will keep the list of numbers, my dear," he said. "If I were to give it to you, you would most likely lose it."

He folded the sheet of paper and put it in a drawer of his desk.

"Twenty years hence, Aurora," he said, "should I live so long, I should be able to produce this paper, if it were wanted."

"Which it never will be, you dear methodical papa," answered Aurora. "My troubles are ended now. Yes," she added, in a graver tone, "I pray God that my troubles may be ended now."

She encircled her arms about her father's neck, and kissed him tenderly.

"I must leave you, dearest, to-day," she said; "you must not ask me why,—you must ask me nothing! You must only love and trust me,—as my poor John trusts me,—faithfully, hopefully, through everything."

CHAPTER VII.

CAPTAIN PRODDER.

While the Doncaster express was carrying Mr. and Mrs. Mellish northwards, another express journeyed from Liverpool to London with its load of passengers.

Amongst these passengers there was a certain broad-shouldered and rather bull-necked individual, who attracted considerable attention during the journey, and was an object of some interest to his fellow-travellers and the railway officials at the two or three stations where the train stopped.

He was a man of about fifty years of age, but his years were worn very lightly, and only recorded by some wandering streaks and patches of gray amongst his thick blue-black stubble of hair. His complexion, naturally dark, had become of such a bronzed and coppery tint by perpetual exposure to meridian suns, tropical hot winds, the

fiery breath of the simoom, and the many other trifling inconveniences attendant upon an out-door life, as to cause him to be frequently mistaken for the inhabitant of some one of those countries in which the complexion of the natives fluctuates between burnt sienna, Indian red, and Vandyke brown. But it was rarely long before he took an opportunity to rectify this mistake, and to express that hearty contempt and aversion for all *furriners* which is natural to the unspoiled and unsophisticated Briton.

Upon this particular occasion he had not been half an hour in the society of his fellow-passengers before he had informed them that he was a native of Liverpool, and the captain of a merchant vessel trading, in a manner of speaking, he said, everywhere; that he had run away from his father and his home at a very early period of his life; and had shifted for himself in different parts of the globe ever since; that his Christian name was Samuel and his surname Prodder, and that his father had been, like himself, a captain in the merchant's service. He chewed so much tobacco and drank so much fiery Jamaica rum from a pocket-pistol in the intervals of his conversation,

that the first-class compartment in which he sat was odorous with the compound perfume. But he was such a hearty, loud-spoken fellow, and there was such a pleasant twinkle in his black eyes, that the passengers (with the exception of one crusty old lady) treated him with great good-humour, and listened very patiently to his talk.

"Chewin' aint smokin', you know, is it?" he said, with a great guffaw, as he cut himself a terrible block of Cavendish; "and railway companies aint got any laws against that. They can put a fellow's pipe out, but he can chew his quid in their faces; though I won't say which is wust for their carpets, neither."

I am sorry to be compelled to confess that this brown-visaged merchant-captain, who said *wust*, and chewed Cavendish tobacco, was uncle to Mrs. John Mellish of Mellish Park; and that the motive for this very journey was neither more nor less than his desire to become acquainted with his niece.

He imparted this fact—as well as much other information relating to himself, his tastes, habits, adventures, opinions, and sentiments—to his travelling companions in the course of the journey.

"Do you know for why I'm going to London by this identical train?" he asked generally, as the passengers settled themselves into their places after taking refreshment at Rugby.

The gentlemen looked over their newspapers at the talkative sailor, and a young lady looked up from her book; but nobody volunteered to speculate an opinion upon the mainspring of Mr. Prodder's actions.

"I'll tell you for why," resumed the merchant captain, addressing the assembly, as if in answer to their eager questioning. "I'm going to see my niece, which I have never seen before. When I ran away from father's ship, the *Ventur'some*, nigh upon forty year ago, and went aboard the craft of a captain by the name of Mobley, which was a good master to me for many a day, I had a little sister as I had left behind at Liverpool, which was dearer to me than my life." He paused to refresh himself with rather a demonstrative sip from the pocket-pistol. "But if *you*," he continued generally, "if *you* had a father that'd fetch you a clout of the head as soon as look at you, *you'd* run away perhaps; and so did I. I took the opportunity to be missin' one night as

father was settin' sail from Yarmouth Harbour; and not settin' that wonderful store by me which some folks do by their only sons, he shipped his anchor without stoppin' to ask many questions, and left me hidin' in one of the little alleys which cut the Town of Yarmouth through and across, like they cut the cakes they make there. There was many in Yarmouth that knew me, and there wasn't one that didn't say, 'Sarve him right,' when they heard how I'd given father the slip; and the next day Cap'en Mobley gave me a berth as cabin-boy aboard the *Mariar Anne*."

Mr. Prodder again paused to partake of refreshment from his portable spirit-store, and this time politely handed the pocket-pistol to the company.

"Now perhaps you'll not believe me," he resumed, after his friendly offer had been refused, and the wicker-covered vessel replaced in his capacious pocket,—"you won't perhaps believe me when I tell you, as I tell you candid, that up to last Saturday week I never could find the time nor the opportunity to go back to Liverpool, and ask after the little sister that I'd left no higher than the kitchen table, and that had cried fit to break her poor little heart when I went away.

But whether you believe it or whether you don't, it's as true as gospel," cried the sailor, thumping his ponderous fist upon the padded elbow of the compartment in which he sat; "it's as true as gospel. I've coasted America, North and South; I've carried West-Indian goods to the East Indies, and East-Indian goods to the West Indies; I've traded in Norwegian goods between Norway and Hull; I've carried Sheffield goods from Hull to South America; I've traded between all manner of countries and all manner of docks; but somehow or other I've never had the time to spare to go on shore at Liverpool, and find out the narrow little street in which I left my sister Eliza, no higher than the table, more than forty years ago, until last Saturday was a week. Last Saturday was a week I touched at Liverpool with a cargo of furs and poll-parrots,—what you may call fancy goods; and I said to my mate, I said, 'I'll tell you what I'll do, Jack; I'll go ashore, and see my little sister Eliza.'"

He paused once more, and a softening change came over the brightness of his black eyes. This time he did not apply himself to the pocket-pistol. This time he brushed the back of his brown hand

across his eye-lashes, and brought it away with a drop or two of moisture glittering upon the bronzed skin. Even his voice was changed when he continued, and had mellowed to a richer and more mournful depth, until it very much resembled the melodious utterance which twenty-one years before had assisted to render Miss Eliza Percival the popular tragedian of the Preston and Bradford circuit.

"God forgive me," continued the sailor, in that altered voice; "but throughout my voyages I'd never thought of my sister Eliza but in two ways; sometimes one, sometimes t'other. One way of thinking of her, and expecting to see her, was as the little sister that I'd left, not altered by so much as one lock of her hair being changed from the identical curl into which it was twisted the morning she cried and clung about me on board the *Ventur'some,* having come aboard to wish father and me good-bye. Perhaps I oftenest thought of her in this way. Anyhow, it was in this way, and no other, that I always saw her in my dreams. The other way of thinking of her, and expectin' to see her, was as a handsome, full-grown, buxom, married woman, with

a troop of saucy children hanging on to her apron-string, and every one of em askin' what Uncle Samuel had brought 'em from foreign parts. Of course this fancy was the most rational of the two; but the other fancy, of the little child with the long black curly hair, would come to me very often, especially at night when all was quiet aboard, and when I took the wheel in a spell while the helmsman turned in. Lord bless you, ladies and gentlemen! many a time of a starlight night, when we've been in them latitudes where the stars are brighter than common, I've seen the floating mists upon the water take the very shape of that light figure of a little girl in a white pinafore, and come skipping towards me across the waves. I don't mean that I've seen a ghost, you know; but I mean that I could have seen one if I'd had the mind, and that I've seen as much of a one as folks ever do see upon this earth: the ghosts of their own memories and their own sorrows, mixed up with the mists of the sea or the shadows of the trees wavin' back-'ards and for'ards in the moonlight, or a white curtain agen a window, or something of that sort. Well, I was such a precious old fool with these

fancies and fantigs,"—Mr. Samuel Prodder seemed rather to pride himself upon the latter word, as something out of the common,—"that when I went ashore at Liverpool, last Saturday was a week, I couldn't keep my eyes off the little girls in white pinafores as passed me by in the streets, thinkin' to see my Eliza skippin' along, with her black curls flyin' in the wind, and a bit of chalk, to play hop-scotch with, in her hand; so I was obliged to say to myself, quite serious, 'Now, Samuel Prodder, the little girl you're a lookin' for must be fifty years of age, if she's a day, and it's more than likely that she's left off playin' hop-scotch and wearin' white pinafores by this time.' If I hadn't kept repeatin' this, internally like, all the way I went, I should have stopped half the little girls in Liverpool to ask 'em if their name was Eliza, and if they'd ever had a brother as ran away and was lost. I had only one thought of how to set about findin' her, and that was to walk straight to the back street in which I remembered leavin' her forty years before. I'd no thought that those forty years could make any more change than to change her from a girl to a woman, and it seemed almost

strange to me that they could make as much change as that. There was one thing I never thought of; and if my heart beat loud and quick when I knocked at the little front-door of the very identical house in which we'd lodged, it was with nothing but hope and joy. The forty years that had sent railways spinning all over England hadn't made much difference in the old house; it was forty years dirtier, perhaps, and forty years shabbier, and it stood in the very heart of the town instead of on the edge of the open country; but, exceptin' that, it was pretty much the same; and I expected to see the same landlady come to open the door, with the same dirty artificial flowers in her cap, and the same old slippers down at heel scrapin' after her along the bit of oilcloth. It gave me a kind of a turn when I didn't see this identical landlady, though she'd have been turned a hundred years old if she'd been alive; and I might have prepared myself for the disappointment if I'd thought of that, but I hadn't; and when the door was opened by a young woman with sandy hair, brushed backwards as if she'd been a Chinese, and no eyebrows to speak of, I did feel disappointed. The young woman

had a baby in her arms, a black-eyed baby, with its eyes opened so wide that it seemed as if it had been very much surprised with the look of things on first comin' into the world, and hadn't quite recovered itself yet; so I thought to myself, as soon as I clapped eyes on the little one, why, as sure as a gun, that's my sister Eliza's baby; and my sister Eliza's married, and lives here still. But the young woman had never heard the name of Prodder, and didn't think there was anybody in the neighbourhood as ever had. I felt my heart, which had been beatin' louder and quicker every minute, stop all of a sudden when she said this, and seemed to drop down like a dead weight; but I thanked her for her civil answers to my questions, and went on to the next house to inquire there. I might have saved myself the trouble, for I made the same inquiries at every house on each side of the street, going straight from door to door, till the people thought I was a sea-farin' tax-gatherer; but nobody had never heard the name of Prodder, and the oldest inhabitant in the street hadn't lived there ten years. I was quite disheartened when I left the neighbourhood, which had once been so

familiar, and which seemed so strange and small and mean and shabby now. I'd had so little thought of failing to find Eliza in the very house in which I'd left her, that I'd made no plans beyond. So I was brought to a dead stop; and I went back to the tavern where I'd left my carpet-bag, and I had a chop brought me for my dinner, and I sat with my knife and fork before me thinkin' what I was to do next. When Eliza and I had parted forty years before, I remembered father leavin' her in charge of a sister of my mother's (my poor mother had been dead a year), and I thought to myself, the only chance there is left for me now is to find Aunt Sarah."

By the time Mr. Prodder arrived at this stage of his narrative his listeners had dropped off gradually, the gentlemen returning to their newspapers, and the young lady to her book, until the merchant-captain found himself reduced to communicate his adventures to one goodnatured-looking young fellow, who seemed interested in the brown-faced sailor, and encouraged him every now and then with an assenting nod or a friendly "Ay, ay, to be sure."

"'The only chance I can see,' ses I," continued Mr. Prodder, "'is to find aunt Sarah.' I found aunt Sarah. She'd been keepin' a shop in the general line when I went away forty year ago, and she was keepin' the same shop in the general line when I came back last Saturday week; and there was the same flyblown handbills of ships that was to sail immediate, and that had sailed two year ago, accordin' to the date upon the bills; and the same wooden sugar-loaves wrapped up in white paper; and the same lattice-work gate, with a bell that rang as loud as if it was meant to give the alarm to all Liverpool as well as to my aunt Sarah in the parlour behind the shop. The poor old soul was standing behind the counter, serving two ounces of tea to a customer, when I went in. Forty years had made so much change in her, that I shouldn't have known her if I hadn't known the shop. She wore black curls upon her forehead, and a brooch like a brass butterfly in the middle of the curls, where the parting ought to have been, and she wore a beard; and the curls were false, but the beard wasn't; and her voice was very deep, and rather manly, and she seemed to me to have grown

manly altogether in the forty years that I'd been away. She tied up the two ounces of tea, and then asked me what I pleased to want. I told her that I was little Sam, and that I wanted my sister Eliza."

The merchant-captain paused, and looked out of the window for upwards of five minutes before he resumed his story. When he did resume it, he spoke in a very low voice, and in short detached sentences, as if he couldn't trust himself with long ones for fear he should break down in the middle of them.

"Eliza had been dead one-and-twenty years. Aunt Sarah told me all about it. She'd tried the artificial flower-makin'; and she hadn't liked it. And she'd turned play-actress. And when she was nine-and-twenty, she'd married; she'd married a gentleman that had no end of money; and she'd gone to live at a fine place somewheres in Kent. I've got the name of it wrote down in my memorandum-book. But she'd been a good and generous friend to aunt Sarah; and aunt Sarah was to have gone to Kent to see her, and to stop all the summer with her. But while aunt was getting ready to go for that very visit,

my sister Eliza died, leaving a daughter behind her, which is the niece that I'm goin' to see. I sat down upon the three-legged wooden stool against the counter, and hid my face in my hands; and I thought of the little girl that I'd seen playin' at hop-scotch forty years before, until I thought my heart would burst; but I didn't shed a tear. Aunt Sarah took a big brooch out of her collar, and showed me a ring of black hair behind a bit of glass, with a gold frame round it. 'Mr. Floyd had this brooch made a purpose for me,' she said; 'he has always been a liberal gentleman to me, and he comes down to Liverpool once in two or three years, and takes tea with me in yon back parlour; and I've no call to keep a shop, for he allows me a handsome income; but I should die of the mopes if it wasn't for the business.' There was Eliza's name and the date of her death engraved upon the back of the brooch. I tried to remember where I'd been and what I'd been doing that year. But I couldn't, sir. All the life that I looked back upon seemed muddled and mixed up, like a dream; and I could only think of the little sister I'd said good-bye to, aboard the *Ven-*

tur'some forty years before. I got round by little and little, and I was able half an hour afterwards to listen to aunt Sarah's talk. She was nigh upon seventy, poor old soul, and she'd always been a good one to talk. She asked me if it wasn't a great thing for the family that Eliza had made such a match; and if I wasn't proud to think that my niece was a young heiress, that spoke all manner of languages, and rode in her own carriage? and if that oughtn't to be a consolation to me? But I told her that I'd rather have found my sister married to the poorest man in Liverpool, and alive and well, to bid me welcome back to my native town. Aunt Sarah said if those were my religious opinions, she didn't know what to say to me. And she showed me a picture of Eliza's tomb in Beckenham churchyard, that had been painted expressly for her by Mr. Floyd's orders. Floyd was the name of Eliza's husband. And then she showed me a picture of Miss Floyd, the heiress, at the age of ten, which was the image of Eliza all but the pinafore; and it's that very Miss Floyd that I'm going to see."

"And I dare say," said the kind listener, "that

Miss Floyd will be very much pleased to see her sailor uncle."

"Well, sir, I think she will," answered the captain. "I don't say it from any pride I take in myself, Lord knows; for I know I'm a rough and ready sort of a chap, that 'u'd be no great ornament in a young lady's drawing-room; but if Eliza's daughter's anything like Eliza, I know what she'll say and what she'll do, as well as if I see her saying and doing it. She'll clap her pretty little hands together, and she'll clasp her arms round my neck, and she'll say, 'Lor, uncle, I am *so* glad to see you!' And when I tell her that I was her mother's only brother, and that me and her mother was very fond of one another, she'll burst out a cryin', and she'll hide her pretty face upon my shoulder, and she'll sob as if her dear little heart was going to break for love of the mother that she never saw. That's what she'll do," said Captain Prodder, "and I don't think the truest born lady that ever was could do any better."

The goodnatured traveller heard a great deal more from the captain of his plans for going to Beckenham to claim his niece's affections, in spite of all the fathers in the world.

"Mr. Floyd's a good man, I dare say, sir," he said; "but he's kept his daughter apart from her aunt Sarah, and it is but likely he'll try to keep her from me. But if he does he'll find he's got a toughish customer to deal with in Captain Samuel Prodder."

The merchant-captain reached Beckenham as the evening shadows were deepening amongst the Felden oaks and beeches, and the long rays of red sunshine fading slowly out in the low sky. He drove up to the old red-brick mansion in a hired fly, and presented himself at the hall-door just as Mr. Floyd was leaving the dining-room to finish the evening in his lonely study.

The banker paused, to glance with some slight surprise at the loosely-clad, weather-beaten looking figure of the sailor, and mechanically put his hand amongst the gold and silver in his pocket. He thought the seafaring man had come to present some petition for himself and his comrades. A life-boat was wanted somewhere on the Kentish coast, perhaps: and this pleasant-looking, bronze-coloured man had come to collect funds for the charitable work.

He was thinking this, when, in reply to the

town-bred footman's question, the sailor uttered the name of Prodder; and in the one moment of its utterance his thoughts flew back over one-and-twenty years, and he was madly in love with a beautiful actress, who owned blushingly to that plebeian cognomen. The banker's voice was faint and husky as he turned to the captain, and bade him welcome to Felden Woods.

"Step this way, Mr. Prodder," he said, pointing to the open door of the study. "I am very glad to see you. I—I—have often heard of you. You are my dead wife's runaway brother."

Even amidst his sorrowful recollection of that brief happiness of the past, some natural alloy of pride had its part, and he closed the study-door carefully before he said this.

"God bless you, sir," he said, holding out his hand to the sailor. "I see I am right. Your eyes are like Eliza's. You and yours will always be welcome beneath my roof. Yes, Samuel Prodder,—you see I know your Christian name;—and when I die you will find you have not been forgotten."

The captain thanked his brother-in-law heartily, and told him that he neither asked or wished for

anything except permission to see his niece, Aurora Floyd.

As he made this request, he looked towards the door of the little room, evidently expecting that the heiress might enter at any moment. He looked terribly disappointed when the banker told him that Aurora was married, and lived near Doncaster; but that if he had happened to come ten hours earlier he would have found her at Felden Woods.

Ah! who has not heard those common words? Who has not been told that, if they had come sooner, or gone earlier, or hurried their pace, or slackened it, or done something that they have not done, the whole course of life would have been otherwise? Who has not looked back regretfully at the past, which, differently fashioned, would have made the present other than it is? We think it hard that we cannot take the fabric of our life to pieces, as a mantua-maker unpicks her work, and make up the stuff another way. How much waste we might save in the cloth, how much better a shape we might make the garment, if we only had the right to use our scissors and needle again, and re-fashion the past by the experience of the present!

"To think, now, that I should have been comin' yesterday!" exclaimed the captain; "but put off my journey because it was a Friday! If I'd only knowed!"

Of course, Captain Prodder, if you had only known what it was not given you to know, you would no doubt have acted more prudently; and so would many other people. If Mr. William Palmer had known that detection was to dog the footsteps of crime, and the gallows to follow at the heels of detection, he would most likely have hesitated long before he mixed the strychnine-pills for the friend whom, with cordial voice, he was entreating to be of good cheer. We spend the best part of our lives in making mistakes, and the poor remainder in reflecting how very easily we might have avoided them.

Mr. Floyd explained, rather lamely, perhaps, how it was that the Liverpool spinster had never been informed of her grand-niece's marriage with Mr. John Mellish; and the merchant-captain announced his intention of starting for Doncaster early the next morning.

"Don't think that I wan't to intrude upon your daughter, sir," he said, as if perfectly acquainted

with the banker's nervous dread of such a visit. "I know her station's high above me, though she's my own sister's only child; and I make no doubt that those about her would be ready enough to turn up their noses at a poor old salt that has been tossed and tumbled about in every variety of weather for this forty year. I only want to see her once in a way, and to hear her say, perhaps, 'Lor, uncle, what a rum old chap you are!' There!" exclaimed Samuel Prodder, suddenly, "I think if I could only once hear her call me uncle, I could go back to sea, and die happy, though I never came ashore again."

CHAPTER VIII.

"HE ONLY SAID, I AM A-WEARY."

Mr. James Conyers found the long summer's days hang rather heavily upon his hands at Mellish Park, in the society of the rheumatic ex-trainer, the stable-boys, and Steeve Hargraves the "Softy," and with no literary resources except the last Saturday's 'Bell's Life,' and sundry flimsy sheets of shiny, slippery tissue-paper, forwarded him by post from King Charles's Croft, in the busy town of Leeds.

He might have found plenty of work to do in the stables, perhaps, if he had had a mind to do it; but after the night of the storm there was a perceptible change in his manner; and the showy pretence of being very busy, which he had made on his first arrival at the Park, was now exchanged for a listless and undisguised dawdling and an unconcerned indifference, which caused the old

trainer to shake his gray head, and mutter to his hangers-on that the new chap warn't up to mooch, and was evidently too grand for his business.

Mr. James cared very little for the opinion of these simple Yorkshiremen; and he yawned in their faces, and stifled them with his cigar smoke, with a dashing indifference that harmonized well with the gorgeous tints of his complexion and the lustrous splendour of his lazy eyes. He had taken the trouble to make himself very agreeable on the day succeeding his arrival, and had distributed his hearty slaps on the shoulder and friendly digs in the ribs, right and left, until he slapped and dug himself into considerable popularity amongst the friendly rustics, who were ready to be bewitched by his handsome face and flashy manner. But after his interview with Mrs. Mellish in the cottage by the north gates, he seemed to abandon all desire to please, and to grow suddenly restless and discontented: so restless and so discontented that he felt inclined even to quarrel with the unhappy "Softy," and led his red-haired retainer a sufficiently uncomfortable life with his whims and vagaries.

Stephen Hargraves bore this change in his new master's manner with wonderful patience. Rather

too patiently, perhaps; with that slow, dogged, uncomplaining patience of those who keep something in reserve as a set-off against present forbearance, and who invite rather than avoid injury, rejoicing in anything which swells the great account, to be squared in future storm and fury. The "Softy" was a man who could hoard his hatred and vengeance, hiding the bad passions away in the dark corners of his poor shattered mind, and bringing them out in the dead of the night to "kiss and talk to," as the Moor's wife kissed and conversed with the strawberry-embroidered cambric. There must surely have been very little "society" at Cyprus, or Mrs. Othello could scarcely have been reduced to such insipid company.

However it might be, Steeve bore Mr. Conyers's careless insolence so very meekly that the trainer laughed at his attendant for a poor-spirited hound, whom a pair of flashing black eyes and a lady's toy riding-whip could frighten out of the poor remnant of wit left in his muddled brain. He said something to this effect when Steeve displeased him once, in the course of the long, temper-trying summer's day; and the "Softy" turned away with something very like a chuckle of savage pleasure

in acknowledgment of the compliment. He was more obsequious than ever after it, and was humbly thankful for the ends of cigars which the trainer liberally bestowed upon him, and went into Doncaster for more spirits and more cigars in the course of the day, and fetched and carried as submissively as that craven-spirited hound to which his employer had politely compared him.

Mr. Conyers did not even make a pretence of going to look at the horses on this blazing 5th of July, but lolled on the window-sill, with his lame leg upon a chair, and his back against the framework of the little casement, smoking, drinking, and reading his price-lists all through the sunny day. The cold brandy-and-water which he poured, without half an hour's intermission, down his handsome throat, seemed to have far less influence upon him than the same amount of liquid would have had upon a horse. It would have put the horse out of condition, perhaps; but it had no effect whatever upon the trainer.

Mrs. Powell, walking for the benefit of her health in the north shrubberies, and incurring imminent danger of a sun-stroke for the same praiseworthy reason, contrived to pass the lodge, and to

see Mr. Conyers lounging, dark and splendid, on the window-sill, exhibiting a kit-cat of his handsome person framed in the clustering foliage which hung about the cottage walls. She was rather embarrassed by the presence of the "Softy," who was sweeping the door-step, and who gave her a glance of recognition as she passed,—a glance which might perhaps have said, "We know his secrets, you and I, handsome and insolent as he is; we know the paltry price at which he can be bought and sold. But we keep our counsel; we keep our counsel till time ripens the bitter fruit upon the tree, though our fingers itch to pluck it while it is still green."

Mrs. Powell stopped to give the trainer good day, expressing as much surprise at seeing him at the north lodge as if she had been given to understand that he was travelling in Kamschatka; but Mr. Conyers cut her civilities short with a yawn, and told her with easy familiarity that she would be conferring a favour upon him by sending him that morning's 'Times' as soon as the daily papers arrived at the Park. The ensign's widow was too much under the influence of the graceful impertinence of his manner to resist it as

she might have done, and returned to the house, bewildered and wondering, to comply with his request. So through the oppressive heat of the summer's day the trainer smoked, drank, and took his ease, while his dependent and follower watched him with a puzzled face, revolving vaguely and confusedly in his dull, muddled brain the events of the previous night.

But Mr. James Conyers grew weary at last even of his own ease; and that inherent restlessness which caused Rasselas to tire of his happy valley, and sicken for the free breezes on the hill-tops and the clamour of the distant cities, arose in the bosom of the trainer, and grew so strong that he began to chafe at the rural quiet of the north lodge, and to shuffle his poor lame leg wearily from one position to another in sheer discontent of mind, which, by one of those many subtle links between spirit and matter that tell us we are mortal, communicated itself to his body, and gave him that chronic disorder which is popularly called "the fidgets." An unquiet fever, generated amidst the fibres of the brain, and finding its way by that physiological telegraph, the spinal marrow, to the remotest stations on the human railway.

Mr. James suffered from this common complaint to such a degree, that as the solemn strokes of the church-clock vibrated in sonorous music above the tree-tops of Mellish Park in the sunny evening atmosphere, he threw down his pipe with an impatient shrug of the shoulders, and called to the "Softy" to bring him his hat and walking-stick.

"Seven o'clock," he muttered, "only seven o'clock. I think there must have been twenty-four hours in this blessed summer's day."

He stood looking from the little casement-window with a discontented frown contracting his handsome eyebrows, and a peevish expression distorting his full, classically-moulded lips, as he said this. He glanced through the little casement, made smaller by its clustering frame of roses and clematis, jessamine and myrtle, and looking like the port-hole of a ship that sailed upon a sea of summer verdure. He glanced through the circular opening left by that scented framework of leaves and blossoms, into the long glades, where the low sunlight was flickering upon waving fringes of fern. He followed with his listless glance the wandering intricacies of the underwood, until they led his weary eyes away to distant patches of blue water,

slowly changing to opal and rose-colour in the declining light. He saw all these things with a lazy apathy, which had no power to recognize their beauty, or to inspire one latent thrill of gratitude to Him who had made them. He had better have been blind; surely he had better have been blind.

He turned his back upon the evening sunshine, and looked at the white face of Steeve Hargraves, the "Softy," with every whit as much pleasure as he had felt in looking at nature in her loveliest aspect.

"A long day," he said,—"an infernally tedious, wearisome day. Thank God, it's over."

Strange that, as he uttered this impious thanksgiving, no subtle influence of the future crept through his veins to chill the slackening pulses of his heart, and freeze the idle words upon his lips. If he had known what was so soon to come; if he had known, as he thanked God for the death of one beautiful summer's day, never to be born again, with its twelve hours of opportunity for good or evil,—surely he would have grovelled on the earth, stricken with a sudden terror, and wept aloud for the shameful history of the life which lay behind him.

He had never shed tears but once since his childhood, and then those tears were scalding drops of baffled rage and vengeful fury at the utter defeat of the greatest scheme of his life.

"I shall go into Doncaster to-night, Steeve," he said to the "Softy," who stood deferentially awaiting his master's pleasure, and watching him, as he had watched him all day, furtively but incessantly; "I shall spend the evening in Doncaster, and—and—see if I can pick up a few wrinkles about the September meeting; not that there's anything worth entering amongst this set of screws, Lord knows," he added, with undisguised contempt for poor John's beloved stable. "Is there a dog-cart, or a trap of any kind, I can drive over in?" he asked of the "Softy."

Mr. Hargraves said that there was a Newport Pagnell, which was sacred to Mr. John Mellish, and a gig that was at the disposal of any of the upper servants when they had occasion to go into Doncaster, as well as a covered van, which some of the lads drove into the town every day for the groceries and other matters required at the house.

"Very good," said Mr. Conyers; "you may run down to the stables, and tell one of the boys to

put the fastest pony of the lot into the Newport Pagnell, and to bring it up here, and to look sharp."

"But nobody but Muster Mellish rides in the Newport Pagnell," suggested the "Softy," with an accent of alarm.

"What of that, you cowardly hound?" cried the trainer contemptuously. "I'm going to drive it to-night, don't you hear? D—n his Yorkshire insolence! Am I to be put down by *him?* It's his handsome wife that he takes such pride in, is it? Lord help him! Whose money bought the dog-cart, I wonder? Aurora Floyd's, perhaps. And I'm not to ride in it, I suppose, because it's my lord's pleasure to drive his black-eyed lady in the sacred vehicle. Look you here, you brainless idiot, and understand me, if you can!" cried Mr. James Conyers in a sudden rage, which crimsoned his handsome face, and lit up his lazy eyes with a new fire,—"look you here, Stephen Hargraves! if it wasn't that I'm tied hand and foot, and have been plotted against and thwarted by a woman's cunning, at every turn, I could smoke my pipe in yonder house, or in a better house, this day."

He pointed with his finger to the pinnacled

roof, and the reddened windows glittering in the evening sun, visible far away amongst the trees.

"Mr. John Mellish!" he said. "If his wife wasn't such a she-devil as to be too many guns for the cleverest man in Christendom, I'd soon make *him* sing small. Fetch the Newport Pagnell!" he cried suddenly, with an abrupt change of tone; "fetch it, and be quick! I'm not safe to myself when I talk of this. I'm not safe when I think how near I was to half a million of money," he muttered under his breath.

He limped out into the open air, fanning himself with the wide brim of his felt hat, and wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

"Be quick!" he cried impatiently to his deliberate attendant, who had listened eagerly to every word of his master's passionate talk, and who now stood watching him even more intently than before, —"be quick, man, can't you? I don't pay you five shillings a week to stare at me. Fetch the trap! I've worked myself into a fever, and nothing but a rattling drive will set me right again."

The "Softy" shuffled off as rapidly as it was within the range of his ability to walk. He had never been seen to run in his life; but had a slow,

side-long gait, which had some faint resemblance to that of the lower reptiles, but very little in common with the motions of his fellow-men.

Mr. James Conyers limped up and down the little grassy lawn in front of the north lodge. The excitement which had crimsoned his face gradually subsided, as he vented his disquietude in occasional impatient exclamations. "Two thousand pounds!" he muttered; "a pitiful, paltry two thousand! Not a twelvemonth's interest on the money I ought to have had—the money I should have had, if——"

He stopped abruptly, and growled something like an oath between his set teeth, as he struck his stick with angry violence into the soft grass. It is especially hard when we are reviling our bad fortune, and quarrelling with our fate, to find at last, on wandering backwards to the source of our ill-luck, that the primary cause of all has been our own evil-doing. It was this that made Mr. Conyers stop abruptly in his reflections upon his misfortunes, and break off with a smothered oath, and listen impatiently for the wheels of the Newport Pagnell.

The "Softy" appeared presently, leading the

horse by the bridle. He had not presumed to seat himself in the sacred vehicle, and he stared wonderingly at James Conyers as the trainer tumbled about the chocolate-cloth cushions, arranging them afresh for his own ease and comfort. Neither the bright varnish of the dark-brown panels, nor the crimson crest, nor the glittering steel ornaments on the neat harness, nor any of the exquisitely-finished appointments of the light vehicle, provoked one word of criticism from Mr. Conyers. He mounted as easily as his lame leg would allow him, and taking the reins from the "Softy," lighted his cigar preparatory to starting.

"You needn't sit up for me to-night," he said, as he drove into the dusty high road: "I shall be late."

Mr. Hargraves shut the iron gates with a loud clanking noise upon his new master.

"But I shall, though," he muttered, looking askant through the bars at the fast disappearing Newport Pagnell, which was now little more than a black spot in a white cloud of dust; "but I shall sit up, though. You'll come home drunk, I lay." (Yorkshire is so pre-eminently a horse-racing and betting county, that even simple country folk

who have never wagered a sixpence in the quiet course of their lives say "I lay" where a Londoner would say "I dare say.") "You'll come home drunk, I lay; folks generally do from Doncaster; and I shall hear some more of your wild talk. Yes, yes," he said in a slow, reflective tone; "it's very wild talk, and I can't make top nor tail of it yet—not yet; but it seems to me somehow as if I knew what it all meant, only I can't put it together—I can't put it together. There's something missin', and the want of that something hinders me putting it together."

He rubbed his stubble of coarse red hair with his two strong, awkward hands, as if he would fain have rubbed some wanting intelligence into his head.

"Two thousand pound!" he said, walking slowly back to the cottage. "Two thousand pound! It's a power of money! Why it's two thousand pound that the winner gets by the great race at Newmarket, and there's all the gentlefolks ready to give their ears for it. There's great lords fighting and struggling against each other for it; so it's no wonder a poor fond chap like me thinks summat about it."

He sat down upon the step of the lodge-door to smoke the cigar-ends which his benefactor had thrown him in the course of the day; but he still ruminated upon this subject, and he still stopped sometimes, between the extinction of one cheroot-stump and the illuminating of another, to mutter, "Two thousand pound! Twenty hundred pound! Forty times fifty pound!" with an unctuous chuckle after the enunciation of each figure, as if it was some privilege even to be able to talk of such vast sums of money. So might some doating lover, in the absence of his idol, murmur the beloved name to the summer breeze.

The last crimson lights upon the patches of blue water died out beneath the gathering darkness; but the "Softy" sat, still smoking, and still ruminating, till the stars were high in the purple vault above his head. A little after ten o'clock he heard the rattling of wheels and the tramp of horses' hoofs upon the high road, and going to the gate he looked out through the iron bars. As the vehicle dashed by the north gates he saw that it was one of the Mellish-Park carriages which had been sent to the station to meet John and his wife.

"A short visit to Loon'on," he muttered. "I lay she's been to fetch t' brass."

The greedy eyes of the half-witted groom peered through the iron bars at the passing carriage, as if he would have fain looked through its opaque panels in search of that which he had denominated "the brass." He had a vague idea that two thousand pounds would be a great bulk of money, and that Aurora would carry it in a chest or a bundle that might be perceptible through the carriage-window.

"I'll lay she's been to fetch t' brass," he repeated, as he crept back to the lodge-door.

He resumed his seat upon the door-step, his cigar-ends, and his reverie, rubbing his head very often, sometimes with one hand, sometimes with both, but always as if he were trying to rub some wanting sense or power of perception into his wretched brains. Sometimes he gave a short restless sigh, as if he had been trying all this time to guess some difficult enigma, and was on the point of giving it up.

It was long after midnight when Mr. James Conyers returned, very much the worse for brandy-and-water and dust. He tumbled over

the "Softy," still sitting on the step of the open door, and then cursed Mr. Hargraves for being in the way.

"B't s'nc' y' h'v' ch's'n t' s't 'p," said the trainer, speaking a language entirely composed of consonants, "y' m'y dr'v' tr'p b'ck t' st'bl's."

By which rather obscure speech he gave the "Softy" to understand that he was to take the dog-cart back to Mr. Mellish's stable-yard.

Steeve Hargraves did his drunken master's bidding, and leading the horse homewards through the quiet night, found a cross boy with a lantern in his hand waiting at the gate of the stable-yard, and by no means disposed for conversation, except, indeed, to the extent of the one remark that he, the cross boy, hoped the new trainer wasn't going to be up to this game every night, and hoped the mare, which had been bred for a racer, hadn't been ill used.

All John Mellish's horses seemed to have been bred for racers, and to have dropped gradually from prospective winners of the Derby, Oaks, Chester Cup, Great Ebor, Yorkshire Stakes, Leger, and Doncaster Cup,—to say nothing of minor victories in the way of Northumberland

Plates, Liverpool Autumn Cups, and Curragh Handicaps, through every variety of failure and defeat,—into the every-day ignominy of harness. Even the van which carried groceries was drawn by a slim-legged, narrow-chested, high-shouldered animal called the "Yorkshire Childers," and bought, in its sunny colt-hood, at a great price by poor John.

Mr. Conyers was snoring aloud in his little bedroom when Steeve Hargraves returned to the lodge. The "Softy" stared wonderingly at the handsome face brutalized by drink, and the classical head flung back upon the crumpled pillow in one of those wretched positions which intoxication always chooses for its repose. Steeve Hargraves rubbed his head harder even than before, as he looked at the perfect profile, the red, half-parted lips, the dark fringe of lashes on the faintly crimson-tinted cheeks.

"Perhaps I might have been good for summat if I had been like *you*," he said, with a half-savage melancholy. "I shouldn't have been ashamed of myself then. I shouldn't have crept into dark corners to hide myself, and think why I wasn't like other people, and what a bitter, cruel shame

it was that I wasn't like 'em. *You've* no call to hide yourself from other folks; nobody tells you to get out of the way for an ugly hound, as you told me this morning, hang you! The world's smooth enough for you."

So may Caliban have looked at Prospero with envy and hate in his heart before going to his obnoxious tasks of dish-washing and trencher-scraping.

He shook his fist at the unconscious sleeper as he finished speaking, and then stooped to pick up the trainer's dusty clothes, which were scattered upon the floor.

"I suppose I'm to brush these before I go to bed," he muttered, "that my lord may have 'em ready when he wakes in th' morning."

He took the clothes on his arm and the light in his hand, and went down to the lower room, where he found a brush and set to work sturdily, enveloping himself in a cloud of dust, like some ugly Arabian genii who was going to transform himself into a handsome prince.

He stopped suddenly in his brushing, by-and-by, and crumpled the waistcoat in his hand.

"There's some paper!" he exclaimed. "A paper sewed up between stuff and linin'."

He omitted the definite article before each of the substantives, as is a common habit with his countrymen when at all excited.

"A bit o' paper," he repeated, "between stuff and linin'! I'll rip' t' waistcoat open and see what 'tis."

He took his clasp-knife from his pocket, carefully unripped a part of one of the seams in the waistcoat, and extracted a piece of paper folded double,—a decent-sized square of rather thick paper, partly printed, partly written.

He leaned over the light with his elbows on the table and read the contents of this paper, slowly and laboriously, following every word with his thick forefinger, sometimes stopping a long time upon one syllable, sometimes trying back half a line or so, but always plodding patiently with his ugly forefinger.

When he came to the last word, he burst suddenly into a loud chuckle, as if he had just succeeded in guessing that difficult enigma which had puzzled him all the evening.

"I know it all now," he said. "I can put it all together now. His words; and hers; and the money. I can put it all together, and make out

the meaning of it. She's going to give him the two thousand pound to go away from here and say nothing about this."

He refolded the paper, replaced it carefully in its hiding-place between the stuff and lining of the waistcoat, then searched in his capacious pocket for a fat leathern book, in which, amongst all sorts of odds and ends, there were some needles and a tangled skein of black thread. Then, stooping over the light, he slowly sewed up the seam which he had ripped open,—dexterously and neatly enough, in spite of the clumsiness of his big fingers.

CHAPTER IX.

STILL CONSTANT.

Mr. James Conyers took his breakfast in his own apartment upon the morning after his visit to Doncaster, and Stephen Hargraves waited upon him; carrying him a basin of muddy coffee, and enduring his ill-humour with the long-suffering which seemed peculiar to this hump-backed, low-voiced stable-helper.

The trainer rejected the coffee, and called for a pipe, and lay smoking half the summer morning, with the scent of the roses and honeysuckle floating into his close chamber, and the July sunshine glorifying the sham roses and blue lilies that twisted themselves in floricultural monstrosity about the cheap paper on the walls.

The "Softy" cleaned his master's boots, set them in the sunshine to air, washed the breakfast-things, swept the door-step, and then seated himself upon

it to ruminate, with his elbows on his knees and his hands twisted in his coarse red hair. The silence of the summer atmosphere was only broken by the drowsy hum of the insects in the wood, and the occasional dropping of some early-blighted leaf.

Mr. Conyers's temper had been in no manner improved by his night's dissipation in the town of Doncaster. Heaven knows what entertainment he had found in those lonely streets, that grass-grown market-place and tenantless stalls, or that dreary and hermetically-sealed building, which looks like a prison on three sides and a chapel on the fourth, and which, during the September meeting, bursts suddenly into life and light with huge posters flaring against its gaunt walls, and a bright blue-ink announcement of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Mathews, or Mr. and Mrs. Charles Kean, for five nights only. Normal amusement in the town of Doncaster between these two oases in the year's dreary circle, the spring and autumn meetings, there is none. But of abnormal and special entertainment there may be much; only known to such men as Mr. James Conyers, to whom the most sinuous alley is a pleasant road, so long as it

leads, directly or indirectly, to the betting-man's god—Money.

However this might be, Mr. Conyers bore upon him all the symptoms of having, as the popular phrase has it, made a night of it. His eyes were dim and glassy; his tongue hot and furred, and uncomfortably large for his parched mouth; his hand so shaky that the operation which he performed with a razor before his looking-glass was a toss-up between suicide and shaving. His heavy head seemed to have been transformed into a leaden box full of buzzing noises; and after getting half through his toilet he gave it up for a bad job, and threw himself upon the bed he had just left, a victim to that biliary derangement which inevitably follows an injudicious admixture of alcoholic and malt liquors.

"A tumbler of Hochheimer," he muttered, "or even the third-rate Chablis they give one at a *table-d'hôte*, would freshen me up a little; but there's nothing to be had in this abominable place except brandy-and-water."

He called to the "Softy," and ordered him to mix a tumbler of the last-named beverage, cold and weak.

Mr. Conyers drained the cool and lucid draught, and flung himself back upon the pillow with a sigh of relief. He knew that he would be thirsty again in five or ten minutes, and that the respite was a brief one; but still it was a respite.

"Have they come home?" he asked.

"Who?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Mellish, you idiot!" answered the trainer fiercely. "Who else should I bother my head about? Did they come home last night while I was away?"

The "Softy" told his master that he had seen one of the carriages drive past the north gates at a little after ten o'clock on the preceding night, and that he supposed it contained Mr. and Mrs. Mellish.

"Then you'd better go up to the house and make sure," said Mr. Conyers; "I want to know."

"Go up to th' house?"

"Yes, coward!—yes, sneak! Do you suppose that Mrs. Mellish will eat you?"

"I don't suppose nought o' t' sort," answered the "Softy" sulkily; "but I'd rather not go."

"But I tell you I want to know," said Mr. Conyers; "I want to know if Mrs. Mellish is at home, and what she's up to, and whether there are any visitors at the house, and all about her. Do you understand?"

"Yes, it's easy enough to understand, but it's rare and difficult to do," replied Steeve Hargraves. "How am I to find out? Who's to tell me?"

"How do I know?" cried the trainer, impatiently; for Stephen Hargraves's slow, dogged stupidity was throwing the dashing James Conyers into a fever of vexation. "How do I know? Don't you see that I'm too ill to stir from this bed? I'd go myself if I wasn't. And can't you go and do what I tell you without standing arguing there until you drive me mad?"

Steeve Hargraves muttered some sulky apology, and shuffled out of the room. Mr. Conyers's handsome eyes followed him with a dark frown. It is not a pleasant state of health which succeeds a drunken debauch; and the trainer was angry with himself for the weakness which had taken him to Doncaster upon the preceding evening, and thereby inclined to vent his anger upon other people.

There is a great deal of vicarious penance done in this world. Lady's-maids are apt to suffer for the follies of their mistresses, and Lady Clara Vere de Vere's French Abigail is extremely likely to have to atone for young Laurence's death by patient endurance of my lady's ill-temper and much unpicking and remaking of bodices, which would have fitted her ladyship well enough in any other state of mind than the remorseful misery which is engendered of an evil conscience. The ugly gash across young Laurence's throat, to say nothing of the cruel slanders circulated after the inquest, may make life almost unendurable to the poor meek nursery-governess who educates Lady Clara's younger sisters; and the younger sisters themselves, and mamma and papa, and my lady's youthful confidantes, and even her haughtiest adorers, all have their share in the expiation of her ladyship's wickedness. For she will not—or she *cannot*—meekly own that she has been guilty, and shut herself away from the world, to make her own atonement and work her own redemption. So she thrusts the burden of her sins upon other people's shoulders, and travels

the first stage to captious and disappointed old-maidism.

The commercial gentlemen who make awkward mistakes in the City, the devotees of the turf whose misfortunes keep them away from Mr. Tattersall's premises on a settling-day, can make innocent women and children carry the weight of their sins, and suffer the penalties of their foolishness. Papa still smokes his Cabanas at fourpence-halfpenny apiece, or his mild Turkish at nine shillings a pound, and still dines at the Crown and Sceptre in the drowsy summer weather, when the bees are asleep in the flowers at Morden College, and the fragrant hay newly stacked in the meadows beyond Blackheath. But mamma must wear her faded silk, or have it dyed, as the case may be; and the children must forego the promised happiness, the wild delight, of sunny rambles on a shingly beach, bordered by yellow sands that stretch away to hug an ever changeful and yet ever constant ocean in their tawny arms. And not only mamma and the little ones, but other mothers and other little ones, must help in the heavy sum of penance for the defaulter's iniquities. The baker may have calculated upon

receiving that long-standing account, and may have planned a new gown for his wife, and a summer treat for his little ones, to be paid for by the expected money; and the honest tradesman, soured by the disappointment of having to disappoint those he loves, is likely to be cross to them into the bargain; and even to grudge her Sunday out to the household drudge who waits at his little table. The influence of the strong man's evil deed slowly percolates through insidious channels of which he never knows or dreams. The deed of folly or of guilt does its fatal work when the sinner who committed it has forgotten his wickedness. Who shall say where or when the results of one man's evil doing shall cease? The seed of sin engenders no common root, shooting straight upwards through the earth, and bearing a given crop. It is the germ of a foul running weed, whose straggling suckers travel underground beyond the ken of mortal eye, beyond the power of mortal calculation. If Louis XV. had been a conscientious man, terror and murder, misery and confusion, might never have reigned upon the darkened face of beautiful France. If Eve had rejected the fatal fruit we might all have been in Eden to-day.

Mr. James Conyers, then, after the manner of mankind, vented his spleen upon the only person who came in his way, and was glad to be able to despatch the "Softy" upon an unpleasant errand, and make his attendant as uncomfortable as he was himself.

"My head rocks as if I was on board a steam-packet," he muttered, as he lay alone in his little bedroom, "and my hand shakes so that I can't hold my pipe steady while I fill it. I'm in a nice state to have to talk to *her*. As if it wasn't as much as I can do at the best of times to be a match for her."

He flung aside his pipe half filled, and turned his head wearily upon the pillow. The hot sun and the buzz of the insects tormented him. There was a big bluebottle fly blundering and wheeling about amongst the folds of the dimity bed-curtains; a fly which seemed the very genius of delirium tremens; but the trainer was too ill to do more than swear at his purple-winged tormentor.

He was awakened from a half-doze by the treble voice of a small stable-boy in the room below. He called out angrily for the lad to come up and state his business. His business was a message from Mr.

John Mellish, who wished to see the trainer immediately,

"*Mr.* Mellish," muttered James Conyers to himself. "Tell your master I'm too ill to stir, but that I'll wait upon him in the evening," he said to the boy. "You can see I'm ill, if you've got any eyes, and you can say that you found me in bed."

The lad departed with these instructions, and Mr. Conyers returned to his own thoughts, which appeared to be by no means agreeable to him.

To drink spirituous liquors and play all-fours in the sanded taproom of a sporting public is no doubt a very delicious occupation, and would be altogether Elysian and unobjectionable if one could always be drinking spirits and playing all-fours. But as the finest picture ever painted by Raphael or Rubens is but a dead blank of canvas upon the reverse, so there is generally a disagreeable *other* side to all the pleasures of earth, and a certain reaction after card-playing and brandy-drinking which is more than equivalent in misery to the pleasures which have preceded it. Mr. Conyers, tossing his hot head from side to side upon a pillow which seemed even hotter, took a very different view of life to that which he had expounded to

his boon companions only the night before in the tap-room of the Lion and Lamb, Doncaster.

"I should liked to have stopped over the Leger," he muttered, "for I meant to make a hatful of money out of the Conjuror; for if what they say at Richmond is anything like truth, he's sure to win. But there's no going against my lady when her mind's made up. It's take it or leave it—yes or no—and be quick about it."

Mr. Conyers garnished his speech with two or three expletives common enough amongst the men with whom he had lived, but not to be recorded here; and, closing his eyes, fell into a doze; a half-waking, half-sleeping torpidity; in which he felt as if his head had become a ton-weight of iron and was dragging him backwards through the pillow into a bottomless abyss.

While the trainer lay in this comfortless semi-slumber Stephen Hargraves walked slowly and sulkily through the wood on his way to the invisible fence, from which point he meant to reconnoitre the premises.

The irregular façade of the old house fronted him across the smooth breadth of lawn, dotted and broken by particoloured flower-beds; by rustic

clumps of gnarled oak supporting mighty clusters of vivid scarlet geraniums, all aflame in the sunshine; by trellised arches laden with trailing roses of every varying shade, from palest blush to deepest crimson; by groups of evergreens, whose every leaf was rich in beauty and luxuriance, whose every tangled garland would have made a worthy chaplet for a king.

The "Softy," in the semi-darkness of his soul, had some glimmer of that light which was altogether wanting in Mr. James Conyers. He felt that these things were beautiful. The broken lines of the ivy-covered house-front, Gothic here, Elizabethan there, were in some manner pleasant to him. The scattered rose-leaves on the lawn; the flickering shadows of the evergreens upon the grass; the song of a skylark too lazy to soar, and content to warble among the bushes; the rippling sound of a tiny waterfall far away in the wood,—made a language of which he only understood a few straggling syllables here and there, but which was not altogether a meaningless jargon to him, as it was to the trainer; to whose mind Holborn Hill would have conveyed as much of the sublime as the untrodden pathways of the Jungfrau. The "Softy"

dimly perceived that Mellish Park was beautiful, and he felt a fiercer hatred against the person whose influence had ejected him from his old home.

The house fronted the south, and the Venetian shutters were all closed upon this hot summer's day. Stephen Hargraves looked for his old enemy Bow-wow, who was likely enough to be lying on the broad stone steps before the hall-door; but there was no sign of the dog's presence anywhere about. The hall-door was closed, and the Venetian shutters, under the rose and clematis shadowed verandah which sheltered John Mellish's room, were also closed. The "Softy" walked round by the fence which encircled the lawn to another iron gate which opened close to John's room, and which was so completely overshadowed by a clump of beeches as to form a safe point of observation. This gate had been left ajar by Mr. Mellish himself, most likely, for that gentleman had a happy knack of forgetting to shut the doors and gates which he opened; and the "Softy," taking courage from the stillness round and about the house, ventured into the garden, and crept stealthily towards the closed shutters before the windows of Mr. Mel-

lish's apartment, with much of the manner which might distinguish some wretched mongrel cur who trusts himself within ear-shot of a mastiff's kennel.

The mastiff was out of the way on this occasion, for one of the shutters was ajar; and when Stephen Hargraves peeped cautiously into the room, he was relieved to find it empty. John's elbow-chair was pushed a little way from the table, which was laden with open pistol-cases and breech-loading revolvers. These, with two or three silk handkerchiefs, a piece of chamois-leather, and a bottle of oil, bore witness that Mr. Mellish had been beguiling the morning in the pleasing occupation of inspecting and cleaning the fire-arms, which formed the chief ornament of his study.

It was his habit to begin this operation with great preparation, and altogether upon a gigantic scale; to reject all assistance with scorn; to put himself in a violent perspiration at the end of half an hour, and to send one of the servants to finish the business, and restore the room to its old order.

The "Softy" looked with a covetous eye at the noble array of guns and pistols. He had that

innate love of these things which seems to be implanted in every breast, whatever its owner's state or station. He had hoarded his money once to buy himself a gun; but when he had saved the five-and-thirty shillings demanded by a certain pawnbroker of Doncaster for an old-fashioned musket, which was almost as heavy as a small cannon, his courage failed him, and he could not bring himself to part with the precious coins, whose very touch could send a shrill of rapture through the slow current of his blood. No, he could not surrender such a sum of money to the Doncaster pawnbroker even for the possession of his heart's desire; and as the stern money-lender refused to take payment in weekly instalments of sixpences, Stephen was fain to go without the gun, and to hope that some day or other Mr. John Mellish would reward his services by the gift of some disused fowling-piece by Forsythe or Manton. But there was no hope of such happiness now. A new dynasty reigned at Mellish, and a black-eyed queen, who hated him, had forbidden him to sully her domain with the traces of his shambling foot. He felt that he was in momentary peril upon the threshold of that sacred chamber, which,

during his long service at Mellish Park, he had always regarded as a very temple of the beautiful; but the sight of fire-arms upon the table had a magnetic attraction for him, and he drew the Venetian shutter a little way further ajar, and slid himself in through the open window. Then, flushed and trembling with excitement, he dropped into John's chair, and began to handle the precious implements of warfare upon pheasants and partridges, and to turn them about in his big, clumsy hands.

Delicious as the guns were, and delightful though it was to draw one of the revolvers up to his shoulder, and take aim at an imaginary pheasant, the pistols were even still more attractive; for with them he could not refrain from taking imaginary aim at his enemies. Sometimes at James Conyers, who had snubbed and abused him, and had made the bread of dependence bitter to him; very often at Aurora; once or twice at poor John Mellish; but always with a darkness upon his pallid face which would have promised little mercy, had the pistol been loaded and the enemy near at hand.

There was one pistol, a small one, and an odd

one apparently, for he could not find its fellow, which took a peculiar hold upon his fancy. It was as pretty as a lady's toy, and small enough to be carried in a lady's pocket, but the hammer snapped upon the nipple, when the "Softy" pulled the trigger, with a sound that evidently meant mischief.

"To think that such a little thing as this could kill a big man like you," muttered Mr. Hargraves, with a jerk of his head in the direction of the north lodge.

He had this pistol still in his hand when the door was suddenly opened, and Aurora Mellish stood upon the threshold.

She spoke as she opened the door, almost before she was in the room.

"John, dear," she said, "Mrs. Powell wants to know whether Colonel Maddison dines here to-day with the Lofthouses."

She drew back with a shudder that shook her from head to foot, as her eyes met the "Softy's" hated face instead of John's familiar glance.

In spite of the fatigue and agitation which she had endured within the last few days, she was not looking ill. Her eyes were unnaturally

bright, and a feverish colour burned in her cheeks. Her manner, always impetuous, was restless and impatient to-day, as if her nature had been charged with a terrible amount of electricity, till she were likely at any moment to explode in some tempest of anger or woe.

"*You* here!" she exclaimed.

The "Softy" in his embarrassment was at a loss for an excuse for his presence. He pulled his shabby hair-skin cap off, and twisted it round and round in his great hands; but he made no other recognition of his late master's wife.

"Who sent you to this room?" asked Mrs. Mellish; "I thought you had been forbidden this place. The house at least," she added, her face crimsoning indignantly as she spoke, "although Mr. Conyers may choose to bring you to the north lodge. Who sent you here?"

"Him," answered Mr. Hargraves, doggedly, with another jerk of his head towards the trainer's abode.

"James Conyers?"

"Yes."

"What does he want here, then?"

"He told me to come down t' th' house, and see if you and master 'd come back."

"Then you can go and tell him that we have come back," she said contemptuously; "and that if he'd waited a little longer he would have had no occasion to send his spies after me."

The "Softy" crept towards the window, feeling that his dismissal was contained in these words, and looking rather suspiciously at the array of driving and hunting whips over the mantel-piece. Mrs. Mellish might have a fancy for laying one of these about his shoulders, if he happened to offend her.

"Stop!" she said impetuously, as he had his hand upon the shutter to push it open; "since you are here, you can take a message, or a scrap of writing," she said contemptuously, as if she could not bring herself to call any communication between herself and Mr. Conyers a note, or a letter. "Yes; you can take a few lines to your master. Stop there while I write."

She waved her hand with a gesture which expressed plainly, "Come no nearer; you are too obnoxious to be endured except at a distance," and seated herself at John's writing-table.

She scratched two lines with a quill-pen upon a slip of paper, which she folded while the ink was

still wet. She looked for an envelope amongst her husband's littered paraphernalia of account-books, bills, receipts, and price-lists, and finding one after some little trouble, put the folded paper into it, fastened the gummed flap with her lips, and handed the missive to Mr. Hargraves, who had watched her with hungry eyes, eager to fathom this new stage in the mystery.

Was the two thousand pounds in that envelope? he thought. No; surely, such a sum of money must be a huge pile of gold and silver,—a mountain of glittering coin. He had seen cheques sometimes, and bank-notes, in the hands of Langley the trainer, and he had wondered how it was that money could be represented by those pitiful bits of paper.

"I'd raythcr hav't i' goold," he thought: "if 'twas mine, I'd have it all i' goold and silver."

He was very glad when he found himself safely clear of the whips and Mrs. John Mellish, and as soon as he reached the shelter of the thick foliage upon the northern side of the Park, he set to work to examine the packet which had been intrusted to him.

Mrs. Mellish had liberally moistened the adhe-

sive flap of the envelope, as people are apt to do when they are in a hurry; the consequence of which carelessness was that the gum was still so wet that Stephen Hargraves found no difficulty in opening the envelope without tearing it. He looked cautiously about him, convinced himself that he was unobserved, and then drew out the slip of paper. It contained very little to reward him for his trouble, only these few words, scrawled in Aurora's most careless hand:—

"Be on the southern side of the wood, near the turnstile, between half-past eight and nine."

The "Softy" grinned as he slowly made himself master of this communication.

"It's oncommon hard wroitin', t' make out th' shapes o' th' letters," he said, as he finished his task. "Whoy can't gentlefolks wroit like Ned Tiller, oop at th' Red Lion,—printin' loike? It's easier to read, and a deal prettier to look at."

He refastened the envelope, pressing it down with his dirty thumb to make it adhere once more, and not much improving its appearance thereby.

"He's one of your rare careless chaps," he muttered as he surveyed the letter; "*he* won't stop t' examine if it's been opened before. What's

insoide were hardly worth th' trouble of openin' it; but perhaps it's as well to know it too."

Immediately after Stephen Hargraves had disappeared through the open window Aurora turned to leave the room by the door, intending to go in search of her husband.

She was arrested on the threshold by Mrs. Powell, who was standing at the door, with the submissive and deferential patience of paid companionship depicted in her insipid face.

"*Does* Colonel Maddison dine here, my dear Mrs. Mellish?" she asked meekly; yet with a pensive earnestness which suggested that her life, or at any rate her peace of mind, depended upon the answer. "I am *so* anxious to know, for of course it will make a difference with the fish,—and perhaps we ought to have some mulligatawny; or at any rate a dish of curry amongst the *entrées;* for these elderly East-Indian officers are so——"

"I don't know," answered Aurora, curtly. "Were you standing at the door long before I came out, Mrs. Powell?"

"Oh, no," answered the ensign's widow, "not long. Did you not hear me knock?"

Mrs. Powell would not have allowed herself to be betrayed into anything so vulgar as an abbreviation by the torments of the rack; and would have neatly rounded her periods while the awful wheel was stretching every muscle of her agonized frame, and the executioner waiting to give the *coup de grâce*.

"Did you not hear me knock?" she asked.

"No," said Aurora; "you didn't knock! Did you?"

Mrs. Mellish made an alarming pause between the two sentences.

"Oh, yes, too-wice," answered Mrs. Powell, with as much emphasis as was consistent with gentility upon the elongated word; "I knocked too-wice; but you seemed so very much preoccupied that——"

"I didn't hear you," interrupted Aurora; "you should knock rather louder when you *want* people to hear, Mrs. Powell. I—I came here to look for John, and I shall stop and put away his guns. Careless fellow!—he always leaves them lying about."

"Shall I assist you, dear Mrs. Mellish?"

"Oh, no, thank you."

"But pray allow me—guns are *so* interesting. Indeed, there is very little either in art or nature which, properly considered, is not——"

"You had better find Mr. Mellish, and ascertain if the colonel *does* dine here, I think, Mrs. Powell," interrupted Aurora, shutting the lids of the pistol-cases, and replacing them upon their accustomed shelves.

"Oh, if you wish to be alone, certainly," said the ensign's widow, looking furtively at Aurora's face bending over the breech-loading revolvers, and then walking genteelly and noiselessly out of the room.

"Who was she talking to?" thought Mrs. Powell. "I could hear her voice, but not the other person's. I suppose it was Mr. Mellish; and yet he is not generally so quiet."

She stopped to look out of a window in the corridor, and found the solution of her doubts in the shambling figure of the "Softy," making his way northwards, creeping stealthily under shadow of the plantation that bordered the lawn. Mrs. Powell's faculties were all cultivated to a state of unpleasant perfection, and she was able, actually as well as figuratively, to see a great deal farther than most people.

John Mellish was not to be found in the house, and on making inquiries of some of the servants, Mrs. Powell learnt that he had strolled up to the north lodge to see the trainer, who was confined to his bed.

"Indeed!" said the ensign's widow; "then I think, as we really ought to know about the colonel and the mulligatawny, I will walk to the north lodge myself, and see Mr. Mellish."

She took a sun-umbrella from the stand in the hall, and crossed the lawn northwards at a smart pace, in spite of the heat of the July noontide. "If I can get there before Hargraves," she thought, "I may be able to find out why he came to the house."

The ensign's widow did reach the lodge before Stephen Hargraves, who stopped, as we know, under shelter of the foliage in the loneliest pathway of the wood, to decipher Aurora's scrawl. She found John Mellish seated with the trainer, in the little parlour of the lodge, discussing the stable arrangement; the master talking with considerable animation, the servant listening with a listless *nonchalance* which had a certain air of depreciation, not to say contempt, for poor John's

racing stud. Mr. Conyers had risen from his bed at the sound of his employer's voice in the little room below, and had put on a dusty shooting-coat and a pair of shabby slippers, in order to come down and hear what Mr. Mellish had to say.

"I'm sorry to hear you're ill, Conyers," John said heartily, with a freshness in his strong voice which seemed to carry health and strength in its very tone. "As you wern't well enough to look in at the house, I thought I'd come over here and talk to you about business. I want to know whether we ought to take Monte Christo out of his York engagement, and if you think it would be wise to let Northern Dutchman take his chance for the Great Ebor. Hey?"

Mr. Mellish's query resounded through the small room, and made the languid trainer shudder. Mr. Conyers had all the peevish susceptibility to discomfort or inconvenience which go to make a man above his station. Is it a merit to be above one's station, I wonder, that people make such a boast of their unfitness for honest employments, and sturdy but progressive labour? The flowers in the fables, that want to be trees, always

get the worst of it, I remember. Perhaps that is because they can do nothing but complain. There is no objection to their growing into trees, if they can, I suppose; but a great objection to their being noisy and disagreeable because they can't. With the son of the simple Corsican advocate who made himself Emperor of France the world had every sympathy; but with poor Louis Philippe, who ran away from a throne at the first shock that disturbed its equilibrium, I fear, very little. Is it quite right to be angry with the world because it worships success? for is not success, in some manner, the stamp of divinity? Self-assertion may deceive the ignorant for a time; but when the noise dies away, we cut open the drum, and find that it was emptiness that made the music. Mr. Conyers contented himself with declaring that he walked on a road which was unworthy of his footsteps; but as he never contrived to get an inch farther upon the great highway of life, there is some reason to suppose that he had his opinion entirely to himself. Mr. Mellish and his trainer were still discussing stable matters when Mrs. Powell reached the north lodge. She stopped for a few

minutes in the rustic doorway, waiting for a pause in the conversation. She was too well bred to interrupt Mr. Mellish in his talk, and there was a chance that she might hear something by lingering. No contrast could be stronger than that presented by the two men. John, broad-shouldered and stalwart; his short crisp chestnut hair brushed away from his square forehead; his bright open blue eyes beaming honest sunshine upon all they looked at; his loose gray clothes neat and well made; his shirt in the first freshness of the morning's toilet; everything about him made beautiful by the easy grace which is the peculiar property of the man who has been born a gentleman, and which neither all the cheap finery which Mr. Moses can sell, nor all the expensive absurdities which Mr. Tittlebat Titmouse can buy, will ever bestow upon the *parvenu* or the vulgarian. The trainer, handsomer than his master by as much as Antinous in Grecian marble is handsomer than the substantially-shod and loose-coated young squires in Mr. Millais' designs; as handsome as it is possible for this human clay to be, with every feature moulded to the highest type of positive beauty'

and yet, every inch of him, a boor. His shirt soiled and crumpled, his hair rough and uncombed; his unshaven chin, dark with the blue bristles of his budding beard, and smeared with the traces of last night's liquor; his dingy hands, supporting this dingy chin, and his elbows bursting half out of the frayed sleeves of his shabby shooting-jacket, leaning on the table in an attitude of indifferent insolence. His countenance expressive of nothing but dissatisfaction with his own lot, and contempt for the opinions of other people. All the homilies that could be preached upon the time-worn theme of beauty and its worthlessness, could never argue so strongly as this mute evidence presented by Mr. Conyers himself in his slouching posture and his unkempt hair. Is beauty, then, so little, one asks, on looking at the trainer and his employer? Is it better to be clean, and well dressed, and gentlemanly, than to have a classical profile and a thrice-worn shirt?

Finding very little to interest her in John's stable-talk, Mrs. Powell made her presence known, and once more asked the all-important question about Colonel Maddison.

"Yes," John answered; "the old boy is sure to come. Let's have plenty of chutnee, and boiled rice, and preserved ginger, and all the rest of the unpleasant things that Indian officers live upon. Have you seen Lolly?"

Mr. Mellish put on his hat, gave a last instruction to the trainer, and left the cottage.

"Have you seen Lolly?" he asked again.

"Ye-es," replied Mrs. Powell; "I have only lately left Mrs. Mellish in your room; she had been speaking to that half-witted person—Hargraves, I think he is called."

"Speaking to *him?*" cried John; "speaking to him in my room? Why, the fellow is forbidden to cross the threshold of the house, and Mrs. Mellish abominates the sight of him. Don't you remember the day he flogged her dog, you know, and Lolly horse—had hysterics?" added Mr. Mellish, choking himself with one word and substituting another.

"Oh, yes, I remember that little—ahem!—unfortunate occurrence perfectly," replied Mrs. Powell, in a tone which, in spite of its amiability, implied that Aurora's escapade was not a thing to be easily forgotten.

"Then it's not likely, you know, that Lolly would talk to the man. You must be mistaken, Mrs. Powell."

The ensign's widow simpered and lifted her eyebrows, gently shaking her head, with a gesture that seemed to say, "Did you ever find *me* mistaken?"

"No, no, my dear Mr. Mellish," she said, with a half-playful air of conviction, "there was no mistake on my part. Mrs. Mellish was talking to the half-witted person; but you know the person is a sort of servant to Mr. Conyers, and Mrs. Mellish may have had a message for Mr. Conyers."

"A message for *him!*" roared John, stopping suddenly and planting his stick upon the ground in a movement of unconcealed passion; "what messages should she have for *him?* Why should she want people fetching and carrying between her and him?"

Mrs. Powell's pale eyes lit up with a faint yellow flame in their greenish pupils as John broke out thus. "It is coming—it is coming—it is coming!" her envious heart cried, and she felt that a faint flush of triumph was gathering in her sickly cheeks.

But in another moment John Mellish recovered his self-command. He was angry with himself for that transient passion. "Am I going to doubt her again?" he thought. "Do I know so little of the nobility of her generous soul that I am ready to listen to every whisper, and terrify myself with every look?"

They had walked about a hundred yards away from the lodge by this time. John turned irresolutely, as if half inclined to go back.

"A message for Conyers," he said to Mrs. Powell;—"ay, ay, to be sure. It's likely enough she might want to send him a message, for she's cleverer at all the stable business than I am. It was she who told me not to enter Cherry-stone for the Chester Cup, and, egad! I was obstinate, and I was licked; as I deserved to be, for not listening to my dear girl."

Mrs. Powell would fain have boxed John's ear, had she been tall enough to reach that organ. Infatuated fool! would he never open his dull eyes and see the ruin that was preparing for him?

"You *are* a good husband, Mr. Mellish," she said with a gentle melancholy. "Your wife *ought*

to be happy!" she added, with a sigh which plainly hinted that Mrs. Mellish was miserable.

"A good husband!" cried John, "not half good enough for her. What can I do to prove that I love her? What can I do? Nothing, except to let her have her own way; and what a little that seems! Why, if she wanted to set that house on fire, for the pleasure of making a bonfire," he added, pointing to the rambling mansion in which his blue eyes had first seen the light, "I'd let her do it, and look on with her at the blaze."

"Are you going back to the lodge?" Mrs. Powell asked quietly, not taking any notice of this outbreak of marital enthusiasm.

They had retraced their steps, and were within a few paces of the little garden before the north lodge.

"Going back?" said John; "no—yes."

Between his utterance of the negative and the affirmative he had looked up, and seen Stephen Hargraves entering the little garden-gate. The "Softy" had come by the short cut through the wood. John Mellish quickened his pace, and followed Steeve Hargraves across the little garden to the threshold of the door. At the threshold he

paused. The rustic porch was thickly screened by the spreading branches of the roses and honeysuckle, and John was unseen by those within. He did not himself deliberately listen; he only waited for a few moments, wondering what to do next. In those few moments of indecision he heard the trainer speak to his attendant.

"Did you see her?" he asked.

"Ay, sure, I see her."

"And she gave you a message?"

"No, she gave me this here."

"A letter?" cried the trainer's eager voice; "give it me."

John Mellish heard the tearing of the envelope and the crackling of the crisp paper; and knew that his wife had been writing to his servant. He clenched his strong right hand until the nails dug into the muscular palm; then turning to Mrs. Powell, who stood close behind him, simpering meekly, as she would have simpered at an earthquake, or a revolution, or any other national calamity not peculiarly affecting herself, he said quietly—

"Whatever directions Mrs. Mellish has given are sure to be right; I won't interfere with them."

He walked away from the north lodge as he spoke, looking straight before him, homewards; as if the unchanging lode-star of his honest heart were beckoning to him across the dreary Slough of Despond, and bidding him take comfort.

"Mrs. Powell," he said, turning rather sharply upon the ensign's widow, "I should be very sorry to say anything likely to offend you, in your character of—of a guest beneath my roof; but I shall take it as a favour to myself if you will be so good as to remember, that I require no information respecting my wife's movements from you, or from any one. Whatever Mrs. Mellish does, she does with my full consent, my perfect approbation. Cæsar's wife must not be suspected, and by Jove, ma'am!—you'll pardon the expression,—John Mellish's wife must not be watched."

"Watched!—information!" exclaimed Mrs. Powell, lifting her pale eyebrows to the extreme limits allowed by nature. "My dear Mr. Mellish, when I really only casually remarked, in reply to a question of your own, that I believed Mrs. Mellish had——"

"Oh, yes," answered John, "I understand. There are several ways by which you can go to

Doncaster from this house. You can go across the fields, or round by Harper's Common, an out-of-the-way, roundabout route, but you get there all the same, you know, ma'am. *I* generally prefer the high road. It mayn't be the shortest way, perhaps; but it's certainly the straightest."

The corners of Mrs. Powell's thin lower lip dropped, perhaps the eighth of an inch, as John made these observations; but she very quickly recovered her habitually genteel simper, and told Mr. Mellish that he really had such a droll way of expressing himself as to make his meaning scarcely so clear as could be wished.

But John had said all that he wanted to say, and walked steadily onwards; looking always towards that quarter in which the pole-star might be supposed to shine, guiding him back to his home.

That home so soon to be desolate!—with such ruin brooding above it as in his darkest doubts, his wildest fears, he had never shadowed forth!

CHAPTER X.

ON THE THRESHOLD OF DARKER MISERIES.

John went straight to his own apartment to look for his wife; but he found the guns put back in their usual places, and the room empty. Aurora's maid, a smartly dressed girl, came tripping out of the servants' hall, where the rattling of knives and forks announced that a very substantial dinner was being done substantial justice to, to answer John's eager inquiries. She told him that Mrs. Mellish had complained of a headache, and had gone to her room to lie down. John went up-stairs, and crept cautiously along the carpeted corridor, fearful of every footfall which might break the repose of his wife. The door of her dressing-room was ajar: he pushed it softly open, and went in. Aurora was lying upon the sofa, wrapped in a loose white dressing-gown, her masses of ebon hair uncoiled and falling about her shoulders in serpentine

tresses, that looked like shining blue-black snakes released from poor Medusa's head to make their escape amid the folds of her garments. Heaven knows what a stranger sleep may have been for many a night to Mrs. Mellish's pillow; but she had fallen into a heavy slumber on this hot summer's day. Her cheeks were flushed with a feverish crimson, and one small hand lay under her head twisted in the tangled masses of her glorious hair.

John bent over her with a tender smile.

"Poor girl!" he thought; "thank God that she can sleep, in spite of the miserable secrets which have come between us. Talbot Bulstrode left her because he could not bear the agony that I am suffering now. What cause had he to doubt her? What cause compared to that which I have had a fortnight ago—the other night—this morning? And yet—and yet I trust her, and will trust her, please God, to the very end."

He seated himself in a low easy-chair close beside the sofa upon which his sleeping wife lay, and resting his head upon his arm, watched her, thought of her, perhaps prayed for her; and after a little while fell asleep himself, snoring in bass har-

mony with Aurora's regular breathing. He slept and snored, this horrible man, in the hour of his trouble, and behaved himself altogether in a manner most unbecoming in a hero. But then he is not a hero. He is stout and strongly built, with a fine broad chest, and unromantically robust health. There is more chance of his dying of apoplexy than of fading gracefully in a decline, or breaking a blood-vessel in a moment of intense emotion. He sleeps calmly, with the warm July air floating in upon him from the open window, and comforting him with its balmy breath, and he fully enjoys that rest of body and mind. Yet even in his tranquil slumber there is a vague something, some lingering shadow of the bitter memories which sleep has put away from him, that fills his breast with a dull pain, an oppressive heaviness, which cannot be shaken off. He slept until half a dozen different clocks in the rambling old house had come to one conclusion, and declared it to be five in the afternoon; and he awoke with a start to find his wife watching him, Heaven knows how intently, with her black eyes filled with solemn thought, and a strange earnestness in her face.

"My poor John!" she said, bending her beautiful head and resting her burning forehead upon his hand; "how tired you must have been, to sleep so soundly in the middle of the day! I have been awake for nearly an hour, watching you—"

"Watching me, Lolly!—why?"

"And thinking how good you are to me. Oh, John, John! what can I ever do—what can I ever do to atone to you for all——"

"Be happy, Aurora," he said huskily, "be happy, and—and send that man away."

"I will, John; he shall go soon, dear,—to-night!"

"What!—then that letter was to dismiss him?" asked Mr. Mellish.

"You know that I wrote to him?"

"Yes, darling, it was to dismiss him,—say that it was so, Aurora. Pay him what money you like to keep the secret that he discovered, but send him away, Lolly, send him away. The sight of him is hateful to me. Dismiss him, Aurora, or I must do so myself."

He rose in his passionate excitement, but Aurora laid her hand softly upon his arm.

"Leave all to me," she said quietly. "Believe

me that I will act for the best. For the best, at least, if you couldn't bear to lose me; and you couldn't bear that, could you, John?"

"Lose you! My God, Aurora! why do you say such things to me? I *wouldn't* lose you. Do you hear, Lolly? I *wouldn't*. I'd follow you to the farthest end of the universe, and Heaven take pity upon those that came between us!"

His set teeth, the fierce light in his eyes, and the iron rigidity of his mouth, gave an emphasis to his words which my pen could never give if I used every epithet in the English language.

Aurora rose from her sofa, and twisting her hair into a thickly-rolled mass at the back of her head, seated herself near the window, and pushed back the Venetian shutter.

"These people dine here to-day, John?" she asked listlessly.

"The Lofthouses and Colonel Maddison? Yes, my darling; and it's ever so much past five. Shall I ring for your afternoon cup of tea?"

"Yes, dear; and take some with me, if you will."

I'm afraid that in his inmost heart Mr. Mellish did not cherish any very great affection for the

decoctions of bohea and gunpowder with which his wife dosed him; but he would have dined upon cod-liver oil had she served the banquet; and he strung his nerves to their extreme tension at her supreme pleasure, and affected to highly relish the post-meridian dishes of tea which his wife poured out for him in the sacred seclusion of her dressing-room.

Mrs. Powell heard the comfortable sound of the chinking of the thin egg-shell china and the rattling of the spoons, as she passed the half-open door on her way to her own apartment, and was mutely furious as she thought that love and harmony reigned within the chamber where the husband and wife sat at tea.

Aurora went down to the drawing-room an hour after this, gorgeous in maize-coloured silk and voluminous flouncings of black lace, with her hair plaited in a diadem upon her head, and fastened with three diamond stars which John had bought for her in the Rue de la Paix, and which were cunningly fixed upon wire springs, which caused them to vibrate with every chance movement of her beautiful head. You will say, perhaps, that she was arrayed too gaudily for the reception of

an old Indian officer and a country clergyman and his wife; but if she loved handsome dresses better than simpler attire, it was from no taste for display, but rather from an innate love of splendour and expenditure, which was a part of her expansive nature. She had always been taught to think of herself as Miss Floyd, the banker's daughter, and she had been taught also to spend money as a duty which she owed to society.

Mrs. Lofthouse was a pretty little woman, with a pale face and hazel eyes. She was the youngest daughter of Colonel Maddison, and was, "By birth, you know, my dear, far superior to poor Mrs. Mellish, who, in spite of her wealth, is only," &c. &c. &c., as Margaret Lofthouse remarked to her female acquaintance. She could not very easily forget that her father was the younger brother of a baronet, and had distinguished himself in some terrific manner by bloodthirsty demolition of Sikhs, far away in the untractable East; and she thought it rather hard that Aurora should possess such cruel advantages through some pettifogging commercial genius on the part of her Glasgow ancestors.

But as it was impossible for honest people to know Aurora without loving her, Mrs. Lofthouse

heartily forgave her her fifty thousand pounds, and declared her to be the dearest darling in the wide world; while Mrs. Mellish freely returned her friendliness, and caressed the little woman as she had caressed Lucy Bulstrode, with a superb yet affectionate condescension, such as Cleopatra may have had for her handmaidens.

The dinner went off pleasantly enough. Colonel Maddison attacked the side-dishes specially provided for him, and praised the Mellish-Park cook. Mr. Lofthouse explained to Aurora the plan of a new schoolhouse which she intended to build for the improvement of John's native parish. She listened patiently to the rather wearisome details, in which a bakehouse and a washhouse and a Tudor chimney seemed the leading features. She had heard so much of this before; for there was scarcely a church, or a hospital, or a model lodging-house, or a refuge for any misery or destitution whatever, that had been lately elevated to adorn this earth, for which the banker's daughter had not helped to pay. But her heart was wide enough for them all, and she was always glad to hear of the bakehouse and washhouse and the Tudor chimney all over again. If she was a little less interested upon this

occasion than usual, Mr. Lofthouse did not observe her inattention, for in the simple earnestness of his own mind, he thought it scarcely possible that the schoolhouse topic could fail to be interesting. Nothing is so difficult as to make people understand that you don't care for what they themselves especially affect. John Mellish could not believe that the entries for the Great Ebor were not interesting to Mr. Lofthouse, and the country clergyman was fully convinced that the details of his philanthropic schemes for the regeneration of his parish could not be otherwise than delightful to his host. But the master of Mellish Park was very silent, and sat with his glass in his hand, looking across the dinner-table and Mrs. Lofthouse's head, at the sunlit tree-tops between the lawn and the north lodge. Aurora, from her end of the table, saw that gloomy glance, and a resolute shadow darkened her face, expressive of the strengthening of some rooted purpose deep hidden in her heart. She sat so long at dessert, with her eyes fixed upon an apricot in her plate, and the shadow upon her face deepening every moment, that poor Mrs. Lofthouse was in utter despair of getting the significant look which was

to release her from the bondage of hearing her father's stories of tiger-shooting and pig-sticking for the two or three hundredth time. Perhaps she never would have got that feminine signal, had not Mrs. Powell, with a significant "hem!" made some observation about the sinking sun.

The ensign's widow was one of those people who declare that there is a perceptible difference in the length of the days upon the twenty-third or twenty-fourth of June, and who go on announcing the same fact until the long winter evenings come with the twenty-first of December, and it is time for them to declare the converse of their late proposition. It was some remark of this kind that aroused Mrs. Mellish from her reverie, and caused her to start up suddenly, quite forgetful of the conventional simpering beck to her guest.

"Past eight!" she said; "no, it's surely not so late?"

"Yes, it is, Lolly," John Mellish answered, looking at his watch; "a quarter past."

"Indeed! I beg your pardon, Mrs. Lofthouse; shall we go into the drawing-room?"

"Yes, dear, do," said the clergyman's wife, "and let's have a nice chat. Papa will drink too

much claret if he tells the pig-sticking stories," she added in a confidential whisper. "Ask your dear, kind husband not to let him have too much claret; because he's sure to suffer with his liver to-morrow, and say that Lofthouse ought to have restrained him. He always says that it's poor Reginald's fault for not restraining him."

John looked anxiously after his wife, as he stood with the door in his hand, while the three ladies crossed the hall. He bit his lip as he noticed Mrs. Powell's unpleasantly-precise figure close to Aurora's shoulder.

"I think I spoke pretty plainly, though, this morning," he thought, as he closed the door and returned to his friends.

A quarter-past eight; twenty minutes past; five-and-twenty minutes past. Mrs. Lofthouse was rather a brilliant pianist, and was never happier than when interpreting Thalberg and Benedict upon her friends' Collard-and-Collards. There were old-fashioned people round Doncaster who believed in Collard and Collard, and were thankful for the melody to be got out of a good honest grand, in a solid rosewood case, unadorned with carved glorification, or ormolu fret-work. At

seven-and-twenty minutes past eight Mrs. Lofthouse was seated at Aurora's piano, in the first agonies of a prelude in six flats; a prelude which demanded such extraordinary uses of the left hand across the right, and the right over the left, and such exercise of the thumbs in all sorts of positions, —in which, according to all orthodox theories of the pre-Thalberg-ite school, no pianist's thumbs should ever be used,—that Mrs. Mellish felt that her friend's attention was not very likely to wander from the keys.

Within the long, low-roofed drawing-room at Mellish Park there was a snug little apartment, hung with innocent rosebud-sprinkled chintzes, and furnished with maple-wood chairs and tables. Mrs. Lofthouse had not been seated at the piano more than five minutes when Aurora strolled from the drawing-room to this inner chamber, leaving her guest with no audience but Mrs. Powell. She lingered for a moment on the threshold to look back at the ensign's widow, who sat near the piano in an attitude of rapt attention.

"She is watching me," thought Aurora, "though her pink eyelids are drooping over her eyes, and she seems to be looking at the border of her pocket-

handkerchief. She sees me with her chin or her nose, perhaps. How do I know? She is all eyes! Bah! am I going to be afraid of *her*, when I was never afraid of *him?* What should I fear except"—(her head changed from its defiant attitude to a drooping posture, and a sad smile curved her crimson lips)—"except to make you unhappy, my dear, my *husband*. Yes," with a sudden lifting of her head, and re-assumption of its proud defiance, "my own true husband! the husband who has kept his marriage-vow as unpolluted as when first it issued from his lips!"

I am writing what she thought, remember, not what she said; for she was not in the habit of thinking aloud, nor did I ever know anybody who was.

Aurora took up a shawl that she had flung upon the sofa, and threw it lightly over her head, veiling herself with a cloud of black lace, through which the restless, shivering diamonds shone out like stars in a midnight sky. She looked like Hecate, as she stood on the threshold of the French window lingering for a moment with a deep-laid purpose in her heart, and a resolute light in her eyes. The clock in the steeple of the village-

church struck the three-quarters after eight while she lingered for those few moments. As the last chime died away in the summer air, she looked up darkly at the evening sky, and walked with a rapid footstep out upon the lawn towards the southern end of the wood that bordered the Park.

CHAPTER XI.

CAPTAIN PRODDER CARRIES BAD NEWS TO HIS NIECE'S HOUSE.

WHILE Aurora stood upon the threshold of the open window, a man was lingering upon the broad stone steps before the door of the entrance hall, remonstrating with one of John Mellish's servants, who held supercilious parley with the intruder, and kept him at arm's length with the contemptuous indifference of a well-bred servant.

This stranger was Captain Samuel Prodder, who had arrived at Doncaster late in the afternoon, had dined at the Reindeer, and had come over to Mellish Park in a gig driven by a hanger-on of that establishment. The gig and the hanger-on were both in waiting at the bottom of the steps; and if there had been anything wanting to turn the balance of the footman's contempt for Captain Prodder's blue coat, loose shirt-collar, and silver

watch chain, the gig from the Reindeer would have done it.

"Yes, Mrs. Mellish is at home," the gentleman in plush replied, after surveying the sea-captain with a leisurely and critical air, which was rather provoking to poor Samuel; "but she's engaged."

"But perhaps she'll put off her engagements for a bit when she hears who it is as wants to see her," answered the captain, diving into his capacious pocket. "She'll tell a different story, I dare say, when you take her that bit of pasteboard."

He handed the man a card, or rather let me say a stiff square of thick pasteboard, inscribed with his name, so disguised by the flourishing caprices of the engraver as to be not very easily deciphered by unaccustomed eyes. The card bore Captain Prodder's address as well as his name, and informed his acquaintances that he was part-owner of the *Nancy Jane*, and that all consignments of goods were to be made to him at &c. &c.

The footman took the document between his thumb and finger, and examined it as minutely as if it had been some relic of the middle ages. A new light dawned upon him as he deciphered the

information about the *Nancy Jane*, and he looked at the captain for the first time with some approach to human interest in his countenance.

"Is it cigars you want to dispose hof?" he asked, "or bandannas? If it's cigars, you might come round to our 'all, and show us the harticle."

"Cigars!" roared Samuel Prodder. "Do you take me for a smuggler, you——?" Here followed one of those hearty seafaring epithets with which polite Mr. Chucks was apt to finish his speeches. "I'm your missus's own uncle; leastways, I—I knew her mother when she was a little gal," he added, in considerable confusion; for he remembered how far away his sea-captainship thrust him from Mrs. Mellish and her well-born husband; "so just take her my card, and look sharp about it, will you?"

"We've a dinner-party," the footman said, coldly, "and I don't know if the ladies have returned to the drawing-room; but if you're anyways related to missis—I'll go and see."

The man strolled leisurely away, leaving poor Samuel biting his nails in mute vexation at having let slip that ugly fact of her relationship.

"That swab in the same cut coat as Lord

Nelson wore aboard the *Victory*, will look down upon her now he knows she's niece to a old sea-captain that carries dry goods on commission, and can't keep his tongue between his teeth," he thought.

The footman came back while Samuel Prodder was upbraiding himself for his folly, and informed him that Mrs. Mellish was not to be found in the house.

"Who's that playin' upon the pianer, then?" asked Mr. Prodder, with sceptical bluntness.

"Oh, that's the clugyman's wife," answered the man, contemptuously; "a *ciddyvong* guvness, I should think, for she plays too well for a real lady. Missus don't play—leastways only pawlkers, and that sort of think. Good night."

He closed the two half-glass doors upon Captain Prodder without further ceremony, and shut Samuel out of his niece's house.

"To think that I played hopscotch and swopped marbles for hardbake with this gal's mother," thought the captain, "and that her servant turns up his nose at me and shuts the door in my face!"

It was in sorrow rather than in anger that the disappointed sailor thought this. He had scarcely

hoped for anything better. It was only natural that those about his niece should flout at and contemptuously treat him. Let him get to *her* —let him come only for a moment face to face with Eliza's child, and he did not fear the issue.

"I'll walk through the Park," he said to the man who had driven him from Doncaster; "it's a nice evenin', and there's pleasant walks under the trees to win'ard. You can drive back into the high road, and wait for me agen that 'ere turnstile I took notice of as we come along."

The driver nodded, smacked his whip, and drove his elderly gray pony towards the Park-gates. Captain Samuel Prodder went, slowly and deliberately enough,—the way that it was appointed for him to go. The Park was a strange territory to him; but while driving past the outer boundaries he had looked admiringly at chance openings in the wood, revealing grassy amphitheatres enriched by spreading oaks, whose branches made a shadowy tracery upon the sunlit turf. He had looked with a seaman's wonder at the inland beauties of the quiet domain, and had pondered whether it might not be a pleasant thing for an old sailor to end his days amid such

monotonous woodland tranquillity, far away from the sound of wreck and tempest, and the mighty voices of the dreadful deep; and, in his disappointment at not seeing Aurora, it was some consolation to the captain to walk across the dewy grass in the evening shadows in the direction where, with a sailor's unerring topographical instinct, he knew the turnstile must be situated.

Perhaps he had some hope of meeting his niece in the pathway across the Park. The man had told him that she was out. She could not be far away, as there was a dinner-party at the house; and she was scarcely likely to leave her guests. She was wandering about the Park, most likely, with some of them.

The shadows of the trees grew darker upon the grass as Captain Prodder drew nearer to the wood; but it was that sweet summer-time in which there is scarcely one positively dark hour amongst the twenty-four; and though the village-clock chimed the half-hour after nine as the sailor entered the wood, he was able to distinguish the outlines of two figures advancing towards him from the other end of the long arcade, that led in a slanting direction to the turnstile.

The figures were those of a man and woman; the woman wearing some light-coloured dress, which shimmered in the dusk; the man leaning on a stick, and obviously very lame.

"Is it my niece and one of her visitors?" thought the captain; "maybe it is. I'll lay by to port of 'em, and let 'em pass me."

Samuel Prodder stepped aside under the shadow of the trees to the left of the grassy avenue through which the two figures were approaching, and waited patiently until they drew near enough for him to distinguish the woman's face. The woman was Mrs. Mellish, and she was walking on the left of the man, and was therefore nearest to the captain. Her head was turned away from her companion, as if in utter scorn and defiance of him, although she was talking to him at that moment. Her face, proud, pale, and disdainful, was visible to the seaman in the chill, shadowy light of the newly-risen moon. A low line of crimson behind the black trunks of a distant group of trees marked where the sun had left its last track, in a vivid streak that looked like blood.

Captain Prodder gazed in loving wonder at the

beautiful face turned towards him. He saw the dark eyes, with their sombre depth, dark in anger and scorn, and the luminous shimmer of the jewels that shone through the black veil upon her haughty head. He saw her, and his heart grew chill at the sight of her pale beauty in the mysterious moonlight.

"It might be my sister's ghost," he thought, "coming upon me in this quiet place; it's a'most difficult to believe as it's flesh and blood."

He would have advanced, perhaps, and addressed his niece, had he not been held back by the words which she was speaking as she passed him—words that jarred painfully upon his heart, telling, as they did, of anger and bitterness, discord and misery.

"Yes, hate you!" she said in a clear voice, which seemed to vibrate sharply in the dusk,—— "hate you! hate you! hate you!" She repeated the hard phrase, as if there were some pleasure and delight in uttering it, which in her ungovernable anger she could not deny herself. "What other words do you expect from me?" she cried, with a low mocking laugh, which had a tone of deeper misery, and more utter hopelessness than

any outbreak of womanly weeping. "Would you have me love you? or respect you? or tolerate you?" Her voice rose with each rapid question, merging into an hysterical sob, but never melting into tears. "Would you have me tell you anything else than what I tell you to-night? I hate and abhor you! I look upon you as the primary cause of every sorrow I have ever known, of every tear I have ever shed, of every humiliation I have endured; every sleepless night, every weary day, every despairing hour, I have ever passed. More than this,—yes, a thousand, thousand times more,—I look upon *you* as the first cause of my father's wretchedness. Yes, even before my own mad folly in believing in you, and thinking you —what?—Claude Melnotte, perhaps!—a curse upon the man who wrote the play, and the player who acted in it, if it helped to make me what I was when I met you! I say again, I hate you! your presence poisons my home, your abhorred shadow haunts my sleep—no, not my sleep, for how should I ever sleep knowing that you are near?"

Mr. Conyers, being apparently weary of walking, leaned against the trunk of a tree to listen to the end of this outbreak, looking insolent defiance at

the speaker. But Aurora's passion had reached that point in which all consciousness of external things passes away in the complete egoism of anger and hate. She did not see his superciliously indifferent look; her dilated eyes stared straight before her into the dark recess from which Captain Prodder watched his sister's only child. Her restless hands rent the fragile border of her shawl in the strong agony of her passion. Have you ever seen this kind of woman in a passion? Impulsive, nervous, sensitive, sanguine; with such a one passion is a madness—brief, thank Heaven! and expending itself in sharply cruel words, and convulsive rendings of lace and ribbon, or coroner's juries might have to sit even oftener than they do. It is fortunate for mankind that speaking daggers is often quite as great a satisfaction to us as using them, and that we can threaten very cruel things without meaning to carry them out. Like the little children who say, "Won't I just tell your mother!" and the terrible editors who write, "Won't I give you a castigation in the Market-Deeping 'Spirit of the Times,' or the 'Walton-on-the-Naze Athenæum!'"

"If you are going to give us much more of this

sort of thing," said Mr. Conyers, with aggravating stolidity, "perhaps you won't object to my lighting a cigar?"

Aurora took no notice of his quiet insolence; but Captain Prodder, involuntarily clenching his fist, bounded a step forward in his retreat, and shook the leaves of the underwood about his legs.

"What's that?" exclaimed the trainer.

"My dog, perhaps," answered Aurora; "he's about here with me."

"Curse the purblind cur!" muttered Mr. Conyers, with an unlighted cigar in his mouth. He struck a lucifer-match against the back of a tree, and the vivid sulphurous light shone full upon his handsome face.

"A rascal!" thought Captain Prodder;—"a good-looking, heartless scoundrel! What's this between my niece and him? He isn't her husband, surely, for he don't look like a gentleman. But if he aint her husband, who is he?"

The sailor scratched his head in his bewilderment. His senses had been almost stupefied by Aurora's passionate talk, and he had only a confused feeling that there was trouble and wretchedness of some kind or other around and about his niece.

"If I thought he'd done anything to injure her," he muttered, "I'd pound him into such a jelly that his friends would never know his handsome face again as long as there was life in his carcass."

Mr. Conyers threw away the burning match, and puffed at his newly-lighted cigar. He did not trouble himself to take it from his lips as he addressed Aurora, but spoke between his teeth, and smoked in the pauses of his discourse.

"Perhaps, if you've—calmed yourself down—a bit," he said, "you'll be so good as—to come to business. What do you want me to do?"

"You know as well as I do," answered Aurora.

"You want me to leave this place?"

"Yes; for ever."

"And to take what you give me—and be satisfied."

"Yes."

"What if I refuse?"

She turned sharply upon him as he asked this question, and looked at him for a few moments in silence.

"What if I refuse?" he repeated, still smoking.

"Look to yourself!" she cried, between her set teeth; "that's all. Look to yourself!"

"What! you'd kill me, I suppose?"

"No," answered Aurora; "but I'd tell all; and get the release which I ought to have sought for two years ago."

"Oh, ah, to be sure!" said Mr. Conyers; "a pleasant thing for Mr. Mellish, and our poor papa, and a nice bit of gossip for the newspapers! I've a good mind to put you to the test, and see if you've pluck enough to do it, my lady."

She stamped her foot upon the turf, and tore the lace in her hands, throwing the fragments away from her; but she did not answer him.

"You'd like to stab me, or shoot me, or strangle me, as I stand here; wouldn't you, now?" asked the trainer, mockingly.

"Yes," cried Aurora, "I would!" She flung her head back with a gesture of disdain as she spoke.

"Why do I waste my time in talking to you?" she said. "My worst words can inflict no wound upon such a nature as yours. My scorn is no more painful to you than it would be to any of the loathsome creatures that creep about the margin of yonder pool."

The trainer took his cigar from his mouth, and struck the ashes away with his little finger.

"No," he said with a contemptuous laugh; "I'm not very thin-skinned; and I'm pretty well used to this sort of thing, into the bargain. But suppose, as I remarked just now, we drop this style of conversation, and come to business. We don't seem to be getting on very fast this way."

At this juncture, Captain Prodder, who, in his extreme desire to strangle his niece's companion, had advanced very close upon the two speakers, knocked off his hat against the lower branches of the tree which sheltered him.

There was no mistake this time about the rustling of the leaves. The trainer started, and limped towards Captain Prodder's hiding-place.

"There's some one listening to us," he said. "I'm sure of it this time;—that fellow Hargraves, perhaps. I fancy he's a sneak."

Mr. Conyers supported himself against the very tree behind which the sailor stood, and beat amongst the undergrowth with his stick, but did not succeed in encountering the legs of the listener.

"If that soft-headed fool *is* playing the spy upon me," cried the trainer, savagely, "he'd

better not let me catch him, for I'll make him remember it, if I do."

"Don't I tell you that my dog followed me here?" exclaimed Aurora contemptuously.

A low rustling of the grass on the other side of the avenue, and at some distance from the seaman's place of concealment, was heard as Mrs. Mellish spoke.

"*That's* your dog, if you like," said the trainer; "the other was a man. Come on a little way further, and let's make a finish of this business; it's past ten o'clock."

Mr. Conyers was right. The church clock had struck ten five minutes before, but the solemn chimes had fallen unheeded upon Aurora's ear, lost amid the angry voices raging in her breast. She started as she looked around her at the summer darkness in the woods, and the flaming yellow moon, which brooded low upon the earth, and shed no light upon the mysterious pathways and the water-pools in the wood.

The trainer limped away, Aurora walking by his side, yet holding herself as far aloof from him as the grassy pathway would allow. They were out of hearing, and almost out of sight, before the

sea-captain could emerge from a state of utter stupefaction so far as to be able to look at the business in its right bearings.

"I ought to ha' knocked him down," he muttered at last, "whether he's her husband or whether he isn't. I ought to have knocked him down, and I would have done it, too," added the captain resolutely, "if it hadn't been that my niece seemed to have a good fiery spirit of her own, and to be able to fire a jolly good broadside in the way of hard words. I'll find my skull-thatcher if I can," said Captain Prodder, groping for his hat amongst the brambles, and the long grass, "and then I'll just run up to the turnstile and tell my mate to lay at anchor a bit longer with the horse and shay. He'll be wonderin' what I'm up to; but I won't go back just yet, I'll keep in the way of my niece and that swab with the game leg."

The captain found his hat, and walked down to the turnstile, where he found the young man from the Reindeer fast asleep, with the reins loose in his hands, and his head upon his knees. The horse, with his head in an empty nose-bag, seemed as fast asleep as the driver.

The young man woke at the sound of the turnstile creaking upon its axis, and the step of the sailor in the road.

"I aint going to get aboard just yet," said Captain Prodder; "I'll take another turn in the wood as the evenin's so pleasant. I come to tell you I wouldn't keep you much longer, for I thought you'd think I was dead."

"I did a'most," answered the charioteer candidly. "My word!—aint you been a time!"

"I met Mr. and Mrs. Mellish in the wood," said the captain, "and I stopped to have a look at 'em. She's a bit of a spitfire, aint she?" asked Samuel, with affected carelessness.

The young man from the Reindeer shook his head dubiously.

"I doan't know about that," he said; "she's a rare favourite hereabouts, with poor folks and gentry too. They do say as she horsewhipped a poor fond chap as they'd got in the stables, for ill-usin' her dog; and sarve him right too," added the young man decisively. "Them Softies is allus vicious."

Captain Prodder pondered rather doubtfully upon this piece of information. He was not par-

ticularly elated by the image of his sister's child laying a horsewhip upon the shoulders of her half-witted servant. This trifling incident didn't exactly harmonize with his idea of the beautiful young heiress, playing upon all manner of instruments, and speaking half a dozen languages.

"Yes," repeated the driver, "they *do* say as she gave t' fondy a good whopping; and damme if I don't admire her for it."

"Ay, ay!" answered Captain Prodder thoughtfully. "Mr. Mellish walks lame, don't he?" he asked, after a pause.

"Lame!" cried the driver; "Lord bless your heart! not a bit of it. John Mellish is as fine a young man as you'll meet in this Riding. Ay, and finer too. I ought to know. I've seen him walk into our house often enough, in the race week."

The captain's heart sank strangely at this information. The man with whom he had heard his niece quarrelling was not her husband, then. The squabble had seemed natural enough to the uninitiated sailor while he looked at it in a matrimonial light; but seen from another aspect it struck sudden terror to his sturdy heart, and

blanched the ruddy hues in his brown face. "Who was he, then?" he thought; "who was it as my niece was talking to—after dark,—alone,—a mile off her own home—eh?"

Before he could seek for a solution to the unuttered question which agitated and alarmed him, the report of a pistol rang sharply through the wood, and found an echo under a distant hill.

The horse pricked up his ears, and jibbed a few paces; the driver gave a low whistle.

"I thought so," he said. "Poachers! This side of the wood's chock full of game; and though Squire Mellish is allus threatenin' to prosecute 'em, folks know pretty well as he'll never do it."

The broad-shouldered, strong-limbed sailor leaned against the turnstile, trembling in every limb.

What was that which his niece said a quarter of an hour before, when the man had asked her whether she would like to shoot him?

"Leave your horse," he said, in a gasping voice; "tie him to the stile, and come with me. If—if—it's poachers, we'll—we'll catch em."

The young man looped the reins across the turnstile. He had no very great terror of any in-

clination for flight latent in the gray horse from the Reindeer. The two men ran in the wood; the captain running in the direction in which his sharp ears told him the shot had been fired.

The moon was slowly rising in the tranquil heavens, but there was very little light yet in the wood.

The captain stopped near a rustic summer-house falling into decay, and half buried amidst the tangled foliage that clustered about the mouldering thatch and the dilapidated wood-work.

"It was hereabout the shot was fired," muttered the captain; "about a hundred yards due nor'ard of the stile. I could take my oath as it weren't far from this spot I'm standin' on."

He looked about him in the dim light. He could see no one; but an army might have hidden amongst the trees that encircled the open patch of turf on which the summer-house had been built. He listened: with his hat off, and his big hand pressed tightly on his heart, as if to still its tumultuous beating. He listened, as eagerly as he had often listened, far out on a glassy sea, for the first faint breath of a rising wind; but he could hear

nothing except the occasional croaking of the frogs in the pond near the summer-house.

"I could have sworn it was about here the shot was fired," he repeated. "God grant as it *was* poachers, after all! but it's given me a turn that's made me feel like some cockney lubber aboard a steamer betwixt Bristol and Cork. Lord, what a blessed old fool I am!" muttered the captain, after walking slowly round the summer-house to convince himself that there was no one hidden in it. "One 'ud think I'd never heerd the sound of a ha'p'orth of powder before to-night."

He put on his hat, and walked a few paces forward, still looking about cautiously, and still listening; but much easier in his mind than when first he had re-entered the wood.

He stopped suddenly, arrested by a sound which has of itself, without any reference to its power of association, a mysterious and chilling influence upon the human heart. This sound was the howling of a dog,—the prolonged, monotonous howling of a dog. A cold sweat broke out upon the sailor's forehead. That sound, always one of terror to his superstitious nature, was doubly terrible to-night.

"It means death!" he muttered, with a groan. "No dog ever howled like that except for death."

He turned back, and looked about him. The moonlight glimmered faintly upon the broad patch of stagnant water near the summer-house, and upon its brink the captain saw two figures, black against the summer atmosphere: a prostrate figure, lying close to the edge of the water; and a large dog, with his head uplifted to the sky, howling piteously.

It was the bounden duty of poor John Mellish, in his capacity of host, to sit at the head of his table, pass the claret-jug, and listen to Colonel Maddison's stories of the pig-sticking and the tiger-hunting, as long as the Indian officer chose to talk for the amusement of his friend and his son-in-law. It was perhaps lucky that patient Mr. Lofthouse was well up in all the stories, and knew exactly which departments of each narrative were to be laughed at, and which were to be listened to with silent and awe-stricken attention; for John Mellish made a very bad audience upon this occasion. He pushed the filberts towards the colonel at the very moment when "the tigress was crouch-

ing for a spring, upon the rising ground exactly above us, sir, and when, by Jove! Charley Maddison felt himself at pretty close quarters with the enemy, sir, and never thought to stretch his legs under this mahogany, or any other man's, sir;" and he spoiled the officer's best joke by asking him for the claret in the middle of it.

The tigers and the pigs were confusion and weariness of spirit to Mr. Mellish. He was yearning for the moment when, with any show of decency, he might make for the drawing-room, and find out what Aurora was doing in the still summer twilight. When the door was opened and fresh wine brought in, he heard the rattling of the keys under Mrs. Lofthouse's manipulation, and rejoiced to think that his wife was seated quietly, perhaps, listening to those sonatas in C flat, which the rector's wife delighted to interpret.

The lamps were brought in before Colonel Maddison's stories were finished; and when John's butler came to ask if the gentleman would like coffee, the worthy Indian officer said, "Yes, by all means, and a cheroot with it. No smoking in the drawing-room, eh, Mellish? Petticoat government and window-curtains, I dare say. Clara

doesn't like my smoke at the Rectory, and poor Lofthouse writes his sermons in the summer-house; for he can't write without a weed, you know, and a volume of Tillotson, or some of these fellows, to prig from—eh, George?" said the facetious gentleman, digging his son-in-law in the ribs with his fat old fingers, and knocking over two or three wine-glasses in his ponderous jocosity.

How dreary it all seemed to John Mellish to-night! He wondered how people felt who had no social mystery brooding upon their hearth; no domestic skeleton cowering in their homely cupboard. He looked at the rector's placid face with a pang of envy. There was no secret kept from *him*. There was no perpetual struggle rending *his* heart; no dreadful doubts and fears that would not be quite lulled to rest; no vague terror incessant and unreasoning; no mute argument for ever going forward, with plaintiff's counsel and defendant's counsel continually pleading the same cause, and arriving at the same result. Heaven take pity upon those who have to suffer such silent misery, such secret despair! We look at our neighbours' smiling faces, and say, in bitterness of spirit, that A is a lucky fellow, and that B

can't be as much in debt as his friends say he is; that C and his pretty wife are the happiest couple we know; and to-morrow B is in the 'Gazette,' and C is weeping over a dishonoured home, and a group of motherless children, who wonder what mamma has done that papa should be so sorry. The battles are very quiet, but they are for ever being fought. We keep the fox hidden under our cloak, but the teeth of the animal are none the less sharp, nor the pain less terrible to bear; a little more terrible, perhaps, for being endured silently. John Mellish gave a long sigh of relief when the Indian officer finished his third cheroot, and pronounced himself ready to join the ladies. The lamps in the drawing-room were lighted, and the curtains drawn before the open windows, when the three gentlemen entered. Mrs. Lofthouse was asleep upon one of the sofas, with a Book of Beauty lying open at her feet, and Mrs. Powell, pale and sleepless,—sleepless as trouble and sorrow, as jealousy and hate, as anything that is ravenous and unappeasable,—sat at her embroidery, working laborious monstrosities upon delicate cambric muslin.

The colonel dropped heavily into a luxurious

easy-chair, and quietly abandoned himself to repose. Mr. Lofthouse awoke his wife, and consulted her about the propriety of ordering the carriage. John Mellish looked eagerly round the room. To him it was empty. The rector and his wife, the Indian officer, and the ensign's widow, were only so many "phosphorescent spectralities," "phantasm captains;" in short, they were not Aurora.

"Where's Lolly?" he asked, looking from Mrs. Lofthouse to Mrs. Powell; "where's my wife?"

"I really do not know," answered Mrs. Powell, with icy deliberation. "I've not been watching Mrs. Mellish."

The poisoned darts glanced away from John's preoccupied breast. There was no room in his wounded heart for such a petty sting as this.

"Where's my wife?" he cried passionately; "you *must* know where she is. She's not here Is she up-stairs? Is she out of doors?"

"To the best of my belief," replied the ensign's widow, with more than usual precision, "Mrs. Mellish is in some part of the grounds; she has been out of doors ever since we left the dining-room."

The French clock upon the mantelpiece chimed the three-quarters after ten as she finished speaking: as if to give emphasis to her words and to remind Mr. Mellish how long his wife had been absent. He bit his lip fiercely, and strode towards one of the windows. He was going to look for his wife; but he stopped as he flung aside the window-curtain, arrested by Mrs. Powell's uplifted hand.

"Hark!" she said, "there is something the matter, I fear. Did you hear that violent ringing at the hall-door?"

Mr. Mellish let fall the curtain, and re-entered the room.

"It's Aurora, no doubt," he said; "they've shut her out again, I suppose. I beg, Mrs. Powell, that you will prevent this in future. Really, ma'am, it is hard that my wife should be shut out of her own house."

He might have said much more, but he stopped, pale and breathless, at the sound of a hubbub in the hall, and rushed to the room-door. He opened it and looked out, with Mrs. Powell and Mr. and Mrs. Lofthouse crowding behind him, and looking over his shoulder.

Half a dozen servants were clustered round a roughly-dressed, seafaring-looking man, who, with his hat off and his disordered hair falling about his white face, was telling in broken sentences, scarcely intelligible for the speaker's agitation, that a murder had been done in the wood.

CHAPTER XII.

THE DEED THAT HAD BEEN DONE IN THE WOOD.

The bare-headed seafaring man who stood in the centre of the hall was Captain Samuel Prodder. The scared faces of the servants gathered round him told more plainly than his own words, which came hoarsely from his parched white lips, the nature of the tidings that he brought.

John Mellish strode across the hall, with an awful calmness on his white face; and parting the hustled group of servants with his strong arms, as a mighty wind rends asunder the storm-beaten waters, he placed himself face to face with Captain Prodder.

"Who are you?" he asked sternly: "and what has brought you here?"

The Indian officer had been aroused by the clamour, and had emerged, red and bristling with

self-importance, to take his part in the business in hand.

There are some pies in the making of which everybody yearns to have a finger. It is a great privilege, after some social convulsion has taken place, to be able to say, "I was there at the time the scene occurred, sir;" or, "I was standing as close to him when the blow was struck, ma'am, as I am to you at this moment." People are apt to take pride out of strange things. An elderly gentleman at Doncaster, showing me his comfortably-furnished apartments, informed me, with evident satisfaction, that Mr. William Palmer had lodged in those very rooms.

Colonel Maddison pushed aside his daughter and her husband, and struggled out into the hall.

"Come, my man," he said, echoing John's interrogatory, "let us hear what has brought you here at such a remarkably unseasonable hour."

The sailor gave no direct answer to the question. He pointed with his thumb across his shoulder towards that dismal spot in the lonely wood, which was as present to his mental vision now as it had been to his bodily eyes a quarter of an hour before.

"A man!" he gasped; "a man—lyin' close agen' the water's edge,—shot through the heart!"

"Dead?" asked some one, in an awful tone. The voices and the questions came from whom they would, in the awe-stricken terror of those first moments of overwhelming horror and surprise. No one knew who spoke except the speakers; perhaps even they were scarcely aware that they had spoken.

"Dead?" asked one of those eager listeners.

"Stone dead."

"A man—shot dead in the wood!" cried John Mellish; "what man?"

"I beg your pardon, sir," said the grave old butler, laying his hand gently upon his master's shoulder: "I think, from what this person says, that the man who has been shot is—the new trainer, Mr.—Mr.——"

"Conyers!" exclaimed John. "Conyers! who —who should shoot him?" The question was asked in a hoarse whisper. It was impossible for the speaker's face to grow whiter than it had been, from the moment in which he had opened the drawing-room door, and looked out into the hall; but some terrible change not to be translated into

words came over it at the mention of the trainer's name.

He stood motionless and silent, pushing his hair from his forehead, and staring wildly about him.

The grave butler laid his warning hand for a second time upon his master's shoulder.

"Sir—Mr. Mellish," he said, eager to arouse the young man from the dull, stupid quiet into which he had fallen,—"excuse me, sir; but if my mistress should come in suddenly, and hear of this, she might be upset, perhaps. Wouldn't it be better to——"

"Yes, yes!" cried John Mellish, lifting his head suddenly, as if aroused into immediate action by the mere suggestion of his wife's name,—"yes! clear out of the hall, every one of you," he said, addressing the eager group of pale-faced servants. "And you, sir," he added to Captain Prodder, "come with me."

He walked towards the dining-room door. The sailor followed him, still bare-headed, still with a semi-bewildered expression in his dusky face.

"It aint the first time I've seen a man shot," he thought; "but it's the first time I've felt like this."

Before Mr. Mellish could reach the dining-room, before the servants could disperse and return to their proper quarters, one of the half-glass doors, which had been left ajar, was pushed open by the light touch of a woman's hand, and Aurora Mellish entered the hall.

"Ah, ha!" thought the ensign's widow, who looked on at the scene, snugly sheltered by Mr. and Mrs. Lofthouse; "my lady is caught a second time in her evening rambles. What will he say to her goings-on to-night, I wonder?"

Aurora's manner presented a singular contrast to the terror and agitation of the assembly in the hall. A vivid crimson flush glowed in her cheeks and lit up her shining eyes. She carried her head high, in that queenly defiance which was her peculiar grace. She walked with a light step; she moved with easy, careless gestures. It seemed as if some burden which she had long carried had been suddenly removed from her. But at sight of the crowd in the hall she drew back with a look of alarm.

"What has happened, John?" she cried; "what is wrong?"

He lifted his hand with a warning gesture,—a

gesture that plainly said: Whatever trouble or sorrow there may be, let her be spared the knowledge of it; let her be sheltered from the pain.

"Yes, my darling," he answered quietly, taking her hand and leading her into the drawing-room; "there is something wrong. An accident has happened—in the wood yonder; but it concerns no one whom you care for. Go, dear; I will tell you all, by-and-by. Mrs. Lofthouse, you will take care of my wife. Lofthouse, come with me. Allow me to shut the door, Mrs. Powell, if you please," he added to the ensign's widow, who did not seem inclined to leave her post upon the threshold of the drawing-room. "Any curiosity which you may have about the business shall be satisfied in due time. For the present, you will oblige me by remaining with my wife and Mrs. Lofthouse."

He paused, with his hand upon the drawing-room door, and looked at Aurora.

She was standing with her shawl upon her arm, watching her husband; and she advanced eagerly to him as she met his glance.

"John," she exclaimed, "for mercy's sake, tell me the truth! *What* is this accident?"

He was silent for a moment, gazing at her eager face,—that face whose exquisite mobility expressed every thought; then, looking at her with a strange solemnity, he said gravely, "You were in the wood just now, Aurora?"

"I was," she answered; "I have only just left the grounds. A man passed me, running violently, about a quarter of an hour ago. I thought he was a poacher. Was it to him the accident happened?"

"No. There was a shot fired in the wood some time since. Did you hear it?"

"I did," replied Mrs. Mellish, looking at him with sudden terror and surprise. "I knew there were often poachers about near the road, and I was not alarmed by it. Was there anything wrong in that shot? Was any one hurt?"

Her eyes were fixed upon his face, dilated with that look of wondering terror.

"Yes; a—a man was hurt."

Aurora looked at him in silence,—looked at him with a stony face, whose only expression was an utter bewilderment. Every other feeling seemed blotted away in that one sense of wonder.

John Mellish led her to a chair near Mrs.

Lofthouse, who had been seated, with Mrs. Powell, at the other end of the room, close to the piano, and too far from the door to overhear the conversation which had just taken place between John and his wife. People do not talk very loudly in moments of intense agitation. They are liable to be deprived of some portion of their vocal power in the fearful crisis of terror or despair. A numbness seizes the organ of speech; a partial paralysis disables the ready tongue; the trembling lips refuse to do their duty. The soft pedal of the human instrument is down, and the tones are feeble and muffled, wandering into weak minor shrillness, or sinking to husky basses, beyond the ordinary compass of the speaker's voice. The stentorian accents in which Claude Melnotte bids adieu to Mademoiselle Deschappelle mingle very effectively with the brazen clamour of the Marseillaise Hymn; the sonorous tones in which Mistress Julia appeals to her Hunchback guardian are pretty sure to bring down the approving thunder of the eighteenpenny gallery; but I doubt if the noisy energy of stage-grief is true to nature, however wise in art. I'm afraid that an actor who would play Claude Melnotte with a pre-Raphaelite

fidelity to nature would be an insufferable bore, and utterly inaudible beyond the third row in the pit. The artist must draw his own line between nature and art, and map out the extent of his own territory. If he finds that cream-coloured marble is more artistically beautiful than a rigid presentment of actual flesh and blood, let him stain his marble of that delicate hue until the end of time. If he can represent five acts of agony and despair without once turning his back to his audience or sitting down, let him do it. If he is conscientiously true to his *art*, let him choose for himself how true he shall be to nature.

John Mellish took his wife's hand in his own, and grasped it with a convulsive pressure that almost crushed the delicate fingers.

"Stay here, my dear, till I come back to you," he said. "Now, Lofthouse!"

Mr. Lofthouse followed his friend into the hall, where Colonel Maddison had been making the best use of his time by questioning the merchant-captain.

"Come, gentlemen," said John, leading the way to the dining-room; "come, colonel, and you too, Lofthouse; and you, sir," he added to the sailor, "step this way."

The *débris* of the dessert still covered the table, but the men did not advance far into the room. John stood aside as the others went in, and entering the last, closed the door behind him, and stood with his back against it.

"Now," he said, turning sharply upon Samuel Prodder, "what is this business?"

"I'm afraid it's sooicide—or—or murder," answered the sailor gravely. "I've told this good gentleman all about it."

This good gentleman was Colonel Maddison, who seemed delighted to plunge into the conversation.

"Yes, my dear Mellish," he said eagerly; "our friend, who describes himself as a sailor, and who had come down to see Mrs. Mellish, whose mother he knew when he was a boy, has told me all about this shocking affair. Of course the body must be removed immediately, and the sooner your servants go out with lanterns for that purpose the better. Decision, my dear Mellish, decision and prompt action are indispensable in these sad catastrophes."

"The body removed!" repeated John Mellish; "the man is dead, then."

"Quite dead," answered the sailor; "he was dead

when I found him, though it wasn't above seven minutes after the shot was fired. I left a man with him—a young man as drove me from Doncaster—and a dog,—some big dog that watched beside him,—howling awful, and wouldn't leave him."

"Did you—see—the man's face?"

"Yes."

"You are a stranger here," said John Mellish; "it is useless, therefore, to ask you if you know who the man is."

"No, sir," answered the sailor, "I didn't know him; but the young man from the Reindeer——"

"He recognized him?"

"Yes; he said he'd seen the man in Doncaster only the night before; and that he was your—trainer, I think he called him."

"Yes, yes."

"A lame chap."

"Come, gentlemen," said John, turning to his friends, "what are we to do?"

"Send the servants into the wood," replied Colonel Maddison, "and have the body carried——"

"Not here," cried John Mellish, interrupting him,—"not here; it would kill my wife."

"Where did the man live?" asked the colonel.

"In the north lodge. A cottage against the northern gates, which are never used now."

"Then let the body be taken there," answered the Indian soldier; "let one of your people run for the parish constable; and you'd better send for the nearest surgeon immediately, though, from what our friend here says, a hundred of 'em couldn't do any good. It's an awful business! Some poaching fray, I suppose."

"Yes, yes," answered John quickly; "no doubt."

"Was the man disliked in the neighbourhood?" asked Colonel Maddison; "had he made himself in any manner obnoxious?"

"I should scarcely think it likely. He had only been with me about a week."

The servants, who had dispersed at John's command, had not gone very far. They had lingered in corridors and lobbies, ready at a moment's notice to rush out into the hall again, and act their minor parts in the tragedy. They preferred doing anything to returning quietly to their own quarters.

They came out eagerly at Mr. Mellish's sum-

mons. He gave his orders briefly, selecting two of the men, and sending the others about their business.

"Bring a couple of lanterns," he said; "and follow us across the Park towards the pond in the wood."

Colonel Maddison, Mr. Lofthouse, Captain Prodder, and John Mellish, left the house together. The moon, still slowly rising in the broad, cloudless heavens, silvered the quiet lawn, and shimmered upon the tree-tops in the distance. The three gentlemen walked at a rapid pace, led by Samuel Prodder, who kept a little way in advance, and followed by a couple of grooms, who carried darkened stable-lanterns.

As they entered the wood, they stopped involuntarily, arrested by that solemn sound which had first drawn the sailor's attention to the dreadful deed that had been done—the howling of the dog. It sounded in the distance like a low, feeble wail: a long monotonous death-cry.

They followed that dismal indication of the spot to which they were to go. They made their way through the shadowy avenue, and emerged upon the silvery patch of turf and fern, where the

rotting summer-house stood in its solitary decay. The two figures—the prostrate figure on the brink of the water, and the figure of the dog with uplifted head—still remained exactly as the sailor had left them three-quarters of an hour before. The young man from the Reindeer stood aloof from these two figures, and advanced to meet the newcomers as they drew near.

Colonel Maddison took a lantern from one of the men, and ran forward to the water's edge. The dog rose as he approached, and walked slowly round the prostrate form, sniffing at it, and whining piteously. John Mellish called the animal away.

"This man was in a sitting posture when he was shot," said Colonel Maddison, decisively. "He was sitting upon this bench."

He pointed to a dilapidated rustic seat close to the margin of the stagnant water.

"He was sitting upon this bench," repeated the colonel; "for he's fallen close against it, as you see. Unless I'm very much mistaken, he was shot from behind."

"You don't think he shot himself, then?" asked John Mellish.

"Shot himself!" cried the colonel; "not a bit of it. But we'll soon settle that. If he shot himself, the pistol must be close against him. Here, bring a loose plank from that summer-house, and lay the body upon it," added the Indian officer, speaking to the servants.

Captain Prodder and the two grooms selected the broadest plank they could find. It was moss-grown and rotten, and straggling wreaths of wild clematis were entwined about it; but it served the purpose for which it was wanted. They laid it upon the grass, and lifted the body of James Conyers on to it, with his handsome face—ghastly and horrible in the fixed agony of sudden death—turned upward to the moonlit sky. It was wonderful how mechanically and quietly they went to work, promptly and silently obeying the colonel's orders.

John Mellish and Mr. Lofthouse searched the slippery grass upon the bank, and groped amongst the fringe of fern, without result. There was no weapon to be found anywhere within a considerable radius of the body.

While they were searching in every direction for this missing link in the mystery of the man's

death, the parish-constable arrived with the servant who had been sent to summon him.

He had very little to say for himself, except that he supposed it was poachers as had done it; and that he also supposed all particklars would come out at the inquest. He was a simple rural functionary, accustomed to petty dealings with refractory tramps, contumacious poachers, and impounded cattle, and was scarcely master of the situation in any great emergency.

Mr. Prodder and the servants lifted the plank upon which the body lay, and struck into the long avenue leading northward, walking a little ahead of the three gentlemen and the constable. The young man from the Reindeer returned to look after his horse, and to drive round to the north lodge, where he was to meet Mr. Prodder. All had been done so quietly that the knowledge of the catastrophe had not passed beyond the domains of Mellish Park. In the summer evening stillness James Conyers was carried back to the chamber from whose narrow window he had looked out upon the beautiful world, weary of its beauty, only a few hours before.

The purposeless life was suddenly closed. The

careless wanderer's journey had come to an unthought-of end. What a melancholy record, what a meaningless and unfinished page! Nature, blindly bountiful to the children whom she has yet to know, had bestowed her richest gifts upon this man. She had created a splendid image, and had chosen a soul at random, ignorantly enshrining it in her most perfectly fashioned clay. Of all who read the story of this man's death in the following Sunday's newspapers, there was not one who shed a tear for him; there was not one who could say, "That man once stepped out of his way to do me a kindness; and may the Lord have mercy upon his soul!"

Shall I be sentimental, then, because he is dead, and regret that he was not spared a little longer, and allowed a day of grace in which he might repent? Had he lived for ever, I do not think he would have lived long enough to become that which it was not in his nature to be. May God, in His infinite compassion, have pity upon the souls which He has Himself created; and where He has withheld the light, may He excuse the darkness! The phrenologists who examined the head of William Palmer declared that he was

so utterly deficient in moral perception, so entirely devoid of conscientious restraint, that he could not help being what he was. Heaven keep us from too much credence in that horrible fatalism! Is a man's destiny here and hereafter to depend upon bulbous projections scarcely perceptible to uneducated fingers, and good and evil propensities which can be measured by the compass or weighed in the scale?

The dismal *cortége* slowly made its way under the silver moonlight, the trembling leaves making a murmuring music in the faint summer air, the pale glowworms shining here and there amid the tangled verdure. The bearers of the dead walked with a slow but steady tramp in advance of the rest. All walked in silence. What should they say? In the presence of death's awful mystery, life made a pause. There was a brief interval in the hard business of existence; a hushed and solemn break in the working of life's machinery.

"There'll be an inquest," thought Mr. Prodder, "and I shall have to give evidence. I wonder what questions they'll ask me?"

He did not think this once, but perpetually; dwelling with a half-stupid persistence upon the

thought of that inquisition which must most infallibly be made, and those questions that might be asked. The honest sailor's simple mind was cast astray in the utter bewilderment of this night's mysterious horror. The story of life was changed. He had come to play his humble part in some sweet domestic drama of love and confidence, and he found himself involved in a tragedy; a horrible mystery of hatred, secrecy, and murder; a dreadful maze, from whose obscurity he saw no hope of issue.

A beacon-light glimmered in the lower window of the cottage by the north gates,—a feeble ray, that glittered like a gem from out a bower of honeysuckle and clematis. The little garden-gate was closed, but it only fastened with a latch.

The bearers of the body paused before entering the garden, and the constable stepped aside to speak to Mr. Mellish.

"Is there anybody lives in the cottage?" he asked.

"Yes," answered John; "the trainer employed an old hanger-on of my own,—a half-witted fellow called Hargraves."

"It's him as burns the light in there, most

likely, then," said the constable. "I'll go in and speak to him first. Do you wait here till I come out again," he added, turning to the men who carried the body.

The lodge-door was on the latch. The constable opened it softly, and went in. A rushlight was burning upon the table, the candlestick placed in a basin of water. A bottle half filled with brandy, and a tumbler, stood near the light; but the room was empty. The constable took his shoes off, and crept up the little staircase. The upper floor of the lodge consisted of two rooms,—one, sufficiently large and comfortable, looking towards the stable-gates; the other, smaller and darker, looked out upon a patch of kitchen-garden and on the fence which separated Mr. Mellish's estate from the high road. The larger chamber was empty; but the door of the smaller was ajar; and the constable, pausing to listen at that half-open door, heard the regular breathing of a heavy sleeper.

He knocked sharply upon the panel.

"Who's there?" asked the person within, starting up from a truckle bedstead. "Is't thou, Muster Conyers?"

"No," answered the constable. "It's me, Wil-

liam Dork, of Little Meslingham. Come down-stairs; I want to speak to you."

"Is there aught wrong?"

"Yes."

"Poachers?"

"That's as may be," answered Mr. Dork. "Come down-stairs, will you?"

Mr. Hargraves muttered something to the effect that he would make his appearance as soon as he could find sundry portions of his rather fragmentary toilet. The constable looked into the room, and watched the "Softy" groping for his garments in the moonlight. Three minutes afterwards Stephen Hargraves slowly shambled down the angular wooden stairs, which wound in a corkscrew fashion, affected by the builders of small dwellings, from the upper to the lower floor.

"Now," said Mr. Dork, planting the "Softy" opposite to him, with the feeble rays of the rushlight upon his sickly face,—"now then, I want you to answer me a question. At what time did your master leave the house?"

"At half-past seven o'clock," answered the "Softy," in his whispering voice; "she was stroikin the half-hour as he went out."

He pointed to a small Dutch clock in a corner of the room. His countrymen always speak of a clock as "she."

"Oh, he went out at half-past seven o'clock, did he?" said the constable; "and you haven't seen him since, I suppose?"

"No. He told me he should be late, and I wasn't to sit oop for him. He swore at me last night for sitting oop for him. But is there aught wrong?" asked the "Softy."

Mr. Dork did not condescend to reply to this question. He walked straight to the door, opened it, and beckoned to those who stood without in the summer moonlight, patiently waiting for his summons. "You may bring him in," he said.

They carried their ghastly burden into the pleasant rustic chamber—the chamber in which Mr. James Conyers had sat smoking and drinking a few hours before. Mr. Morton, the surgeon from Meslingham, the village nearest to the Parkgates, arrived as the body was being carried in, and ordered a temporary couch of mattresses to be spread upon a couple of tables placed together, in the lower room, for the reception of the trainer's corpse.

John Mellish, Samuel Prodder, and Mr. Lofthouse remained outside the cottage. Colonel Maddison, the servants, the constable, and the doctor, were all clustered round the corpse.

"He has been dead about an hour and a quarter," said the doctor, after a brief inspection of the body. "He has been shot in the back; the bullet has not penetrated the heart, for in that case there would have been no hæmorrhage. He has respired after receiving the shot; but death must have been almost instantaneous."

Before making his examination, the surgeon had assisted Mr. Dork, the constable, to draw off the coat and waistcoat of the deceased. The bosom of the waistcoat was saturated with the blood that had flowed from the parted lips of the dead man.

It was Mr. Dork's business to examine these garments, in the hope of finding some shred of evidence which might become a clue to the secret of the trainer's death. He turned out the pockets of the shooting coat, and of the waistcoat; one of these packets contained a handful of halfpence, a couple of shillings, a fourpenny-piece, and a rusty watch-key; another held a little parcel of tobacco wrapped in an old betting-list, and a broken meer-

schaum pipe, black and greasy with the essential oil of bygone shag and bird's-eye. In one of the waistcoat pockets Mr. Dork found the dead man's silver watch, with a blood-stained ribbon and a worthless gilt seal. Amongst all these things there was nothing calculated to throw any light upon the mystery. Colonel Maddison shrugged his shoulders as the constable emptied the paltry contents of the trainer's pockets on to a little dresser at one end of the room.

"There's nothing here that makes the business any clearer," he said; "but to my mind it's plain enough. The man was new here, and he brought new ways with him from his last situation. The poachers and vagabonds have been used to have it all their own way about Mellish Park, and they didn't like this poor fellow's interference. He wanted to play the tyrant, I dare say, and made himself obnoxious to some of the worst of the lot; and he's caught it hot, poor chap!—that's all I've got to say."

Colonel Maddison, with the recollection of a refractory Punjaub strong upon him, had no very great reverence for the mysterious spark that lights the human temple. If a man made himself ob-

noxious to other men, other men were very likely to kill him. This was the soldier's simple theory; and, having delivered himself of his opinion respecting the trainer's death, he emerged from the cottage, and was ready to go home with John Mellish, and drink another bottle of that celebrated tawny port which had been laid in by his host's father twenty years before.

The constable stood close against a candle, that had been hastily lighted and thrust unceremoniously into a disused blacking-bottle, with the waistcoat still in his hands. He was turning the blood-stained garment inside out; for while emptying the pockets he had felt a thick substance that seemed like a folded paper, but the whereabouts of which he had not been able to discover. He uttered a suppressed exclamation of surprise presently; for he found the solution of this difficulty. The paper was sewn between the inner lining and the outer material of the waistcoat. He discovered this by examining the seam, a part of which was sewn with coarse stitches and a thread of a different colour to the rest. He ripped open this part of the seam, and drew out the paper, which was so much bloodstained as to be

undecipherable to Mr. Dork's rather obtuse vision. "I'll say naught about it, and keep it to show to th' coroner," he thought; "I'll lay he'll make something out of it." The constable folded the document and secured it in a leathern pocket-book, a bulky receptacle, the very aspect of which was wont to strike terror to rustic defaulters. "I'll show it to th' coroner," he thought; "and if aught particklar comes out, I may get something for my trouble."

The village surgeon having done his duty, prepared to leave the crowded little room, where the gaping servants still lingered, as if loth to tear themselves away from the ghastly figure of the dead man, over which Mr. Morton had spread a patchwork coverlet, taken from the bed in the chamber above. The "Softy" had looked on quietly enough at the dismal scene, watching the faces of the small assembly, and glancing furtively from one to another beneath the shadow of his bushy red eyebrows. His haggard face, always of a sickly white, seemed to-night no more colourless than usual. His slow whispering tones were not more suppressed than they always were. If he had a hang-dog manner and a furtive glance, the manner

and the glance were both common to him. No one looked at him; no one heeded him. After the first question as to the hour at which the trainer left the lodge had been asked and answered, no one spoke to him. If he got in anybody's way, he was pushed aside; if he said anything, nobody listened to him. The dead man was the sole monarch of that dismal scene. It was to him they looked with awe-stricken glances; it was of him they spoke in subdued whispers. All their questions, their suggestions, their conjectures, were about him, and him alone. There is this to be observed in the physiology of every murder,—that before the coroner's inquest the sole object of public curiosity is the murdered man; while immediately after that judicial investigation the tide of feeling turns; the dead man is buried and forgotten, and the suspected murderer becomes the hero of men's morbid imaginations.

John Mellish looked in at the door of the cottage to ask a few questions.

"Have you found anything, Dork?" he asked.

"Nothing particklar, sir."

"Nothing that throws any light upon this business?"

"No, sir."

"You are going home, then, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir, I must be going back now; if you'll leave some one here to watch——"

"Yes, yes," said John; "one of the servants shall stay."

"Very well, then, sir; I'll just take the names of the witnesses that'll be examined at the inquest, and I'll go over and see the coroner early to-morrow morning."

"The witnesses; ah, to be sure. Who will you want?"

Mr. Dork hesitated for a moment, rubbing the bristles upon his chin.

"Well, there's this man here, Hargraves, I think you called him," he said presently; "we shall want him; for it seems he was the last that saw the deceased alive, leastways as I can hear on yet; then we shall want the gentleman as found the body, and the young man as was with him when he heard the shot: the gentleman as found the body is the most particklar of all, and I'll speak to him at once."

John Mellish turned round, fully expecting to see Mr. Prodder at his elbow, where he had been

some time before. John had a perfect recollection of seeing the loosely-clad seafaring figure standing behind him in the moonlight; but, in the terrible confusion of his mind, he could not remember exactly *when* it was that he had last seen the sailor. It might have been only five minutes before; it might have been a quarter of an hour. John's ideas of time were annihilated by the horror of the catastrophe which had marked this night with the red brand of murder. It seemed to him as if he had been standing for hours in the little cottage-garden, with Reginald Lofthouse by his side, listening to the low hum of the voices in the crowded room, and waiting to see the end of the dreary business.

Mr. Dork looked about him in the moonlight, entirely bewildered by the disappearance of Samuel Prodder.

"Why, where on earth has he gone?" exclaimed the constable. "We *must* have him before the coroner. What'll Mr. Hayward say to me for letting him slip through my fingers?"

"The man was here a quarter of an hour ago, so he can't be very far off," suggested Mr. Lofthouse. "Does anybody know who he is?"

No; nobody knew anything about him. He had appeared as mysteriously as if he had risen from the earth, to bring terror and confusion upon it with the evil tidings which he bore. Stay; some one suddenly remembered that he had been accompanied by Bill Jarvis, the young man from the Reindeer, and that he had ordered the young man to drive his trap to the north gates, and wait for him there.

The constable ran to the gates upon receiving this information; but there was no vestige of the horse and gig, or of the young man. Samuel Prodder had evidently taken advantage of the confusion, and had driven off in the gig under cover of the general bewilderment.

"I'll tell you what I'll do, sir," said William Dork, addressing Mr. Mellish. "If you'll lend me a horse and trap, I'll drive into Doncaster, and see if this man's to be found at the Reindeer. We *must* have him for a witness."

John Mellish assented to this arrangement. He left one of the grooms to keep watch in the death chamber, in company with Stephen Hargraves the "Softy;" and, after bidding the surgeon good night, walked slowly homewards with his friends. The

church clock was striking twelve as the three gentlemen left the wood, and passed through the little iron gateway on to the lawn.

"We had better not tell the ladies more than we are obliged to tell them about this business," said John Mellish, as they approached the house, where the lights were still burning in the hall and drawing-room; "we shall only agitate them by letting them know the worst."

"To be sure, to be sure, my boy," answered the colonel. "My poor little Maggie always cries if she hears of anything of this kind; and Lofthouse is almost as big a baby," added the soldier, glancing rather contemptuously at his son-in-law, who had not spoken once during that slow homeward walk.

John Mellish thought very little of the strange disappearance of Captain Prodder. The man had objected to be summoned as a witness, perhaps, and had gone. It was only natural. He did not even know his name; he only knew him as the mouthpiece of evil tidings, which had shaken him to the very soul. That this man Conyers—this man of all others, this man towards whom he had conceived a deeply-rooted aversion, an unspoken horror—

should have perished mysteriously by an unknown hand, was an event so strange and appalling as to deprive him for a time of all power of thought, all capability of reasoning. Who had killed this man,—this penniless good-for-nothing trainer? Who could have had any motive for such a deed? Who——? The cold sweat broke out upon his brow in the anguish of the thought.

Who had done this deed?

It was not the work of any poacher. No. It was very well for Colonel Maddison, in his ignorance of antecedent facts, to account for it in that manner; but John Mellish knew that he was wrong. James Conyers had only been at the Park a week. He had neither time nor opportunity for making himself obnoxious; and, beyond that, he was not the man to make himself obnoxious. He was a selfish, indolent rascal, who only loved his own ease, and who would have allowed the young partridges to be wired under his very nose. Who, then, had done this deed?

There was only one person who had any motive for wishing to be rid of this man. One person who, made desperate by some great despair, enmeshed perhaps by some net hellishly contrived

by a villain, hopeless of any means of extrication, in a moment of madness, might have—No! In the face of every evidence that earth could offer, —against reason, against hearing, eyesight, judgment, and memory,—he would say, as he said now, *No!* She was innocent! She was innocent! She had looked in her husband's face, the clear light had shone from her luminous eyes, a stream of electric radiance penetrating straight to his heart, —and he had trusted her.

"I'll trust her at the worst," he thought. "If all living creatures upon this wide earth joined their voices in one great cry of upbraiding, I'd stand by her to the very end, and defy them."

Aurora and Mrs. Lofthouse had fallen asleep upon opposite sofas; Mrs. Powell was walking softly up and down the long drawing-room, waiting and watching,—waiting for a fuller knowledge of this ruin which had come upon her employer's household.

Mrs. Mellish sprang up suddenly at the sound of her husband's step as he entered the drawing-room.

"Oh, John!" she cried, running to him and laying her hands upon his broad shoulders, "thank Heaven you are come back! Now tell me all!

Tell me all, John! I am prepared to hear anything, no matter what. This is no ordinary accident. The man who was hurt——"

Her eyes dilated as she looked at him, with a glance of intelligence that plainly said, "I can guess what has happened."

"The man was very seriously hurt, Lolly," her husband answered quietly.

"What man?"

"The trainer recommended to me by John Pastern."

She looked at him for a few moments in silence.

"Is he dead?" she asked, after that brief pause.

"He is."

Her head sank forward upon her breast, and she walked away, quietly returning to the sofa from which she had arisen.

"I am very sorry for him," she said; "he was not a good man. I am sorry he was not allowed time to repent of his wickedness."

"You knew him, then?" asked Mrs. Lofthouse, who had expressed unbounded consternation at the trainer's death.

"Yes; he was in my father's service some years ago."

Mr. Lofthouse's carriage had been waiting ever since eleven o'clock, and the rector's wife was only too glad to bid her friends good-night, and to drive away from Mellish Park and its fatal associations; so, though Colonel Maddison would have preferred stopping to smoke another cheroot while he discussed the business with John Mellish, he was fain to submit to feminine authority, and take his seat by his daughter's side in the comfortable landau, which was an open or a close carriage as the convenience of its proprietor dictated. The vehicle rolled away upon the smooth carriage-drive; the servants closed the hall-doors, and lingered about, whispering to each other, in little groups in the corridors and on the staircases, waiting until their master and mistress should have retired for the night. It was difficult to think that the business of life was to go on just the same though a murder had been done upon the outskirts of the Park, and even the housekeeper, a severe matron at ordinary times, yielded to the common influence, and forgot to drive the maids to their dormitories in the gabled roof.

All was very quiet in the drawing-room where the visitors had left their host and hostess to hug

those ugly skeletons which are put away in the presence of company. John Mellish walked slowly up and down the room. Aurora sat staring vacantly at the guttering wax candles in the old-fashioned silver branches; and Mrs. Powell, with her embroidery in full working order, threaded her needles and snipped away the fragments of her delicate cotton as carefully as if there had been no such thing as crime or trouble in the world, and no higher purpose in life than the achievement of elaborate devices upon French cambric.

She paused now and then to utter some polite commonplace. She regretted such an unpleasant catastrophe; she lamented the disagreeable circumstances of the trainer's death; indeed, she in a manner inferred that Mr. Conyers had shown himself wanting in good taste and respect for his employer by the mode of his death; but the point to which she recurred most frequently was the fact of Aurora's presence in the grounds at the time of the murder.

"I so much regret that you should have been out of doors at the time, my dear Mrs. Mellish," she said; "and, as I should imagine from the direction which you took on leaving the house, actually near the place where the unfortunate

person met his death. It will be so unpleasant for you to have to appear at the inquest."

"Appear at the inquest!" cried John Mellish, stopping suddenly, and turning fiercely upon the placid speaker. "Who says that my wife will have to appear at the inquest?"

"I merely imagined it probable that——"

"Then you'd no business to imagine it, ma'am," retorted Mr. Mellish, with no very great show of politeness. "My wife will not appear. Who should ask her to do so? Who should wish her to do so? What has she to do with to-night's business? or what does she know of it more than you or I, or any one else in this house?"

Mrs. Powell shrugged her shoulders.

"I thought that, from Mrs. Mellish's previous knowledge of this unfortunate person, she might be able to throw some light upon his habits and associations," she suggested mildly.

"Previous knowledge!" roared John. "What knowledge should Mrs. Mellish have of her father's grooms? What interest should she take in their habits or associations?"

"Stop," said Aurora, rising and laying her hand lightly on her husband's shoulder. "My dear,

impetuous John, why do you put yourself into a passion about this business? If they choose to call me as a witness, I will tell all I know about this man's death; which is nothing but that I heard a shot fired while I was in the grounds."

She was very pale; but she spoke with a quiet determination, a calm resolute defiance of the worst that fate could reserve for her.

"I will tell anything that is necessary to tell," she said; "I care very little what."

With her hand still upon her husband's shoulder, she rested her head on his breast, like some weary child nestling in its only safe shelter.

Mrs. Powell rose, and gathered together her embroidery in a pretty, lady-like receptacle of fragile wicker-work. She glided to the door, selected her candlestick, and then paused on the threshold to bid Mr. and Mrs. Mellish good night.

"I am sure you must need rest after this terrible affair," she simpered; "so I will take the initiative. It is nearly one o'clock. *Good* night."

If she had lived in the Thane of Cawdor's family, she would have wished Macbeth and his wife a good night's rest after Duncan's murder;

and would have hoped they would sleep well; she would have curtsied and simpered amidst the tolling of alarm-bells, the clashing of vengeful swords, and the blood-bedabbled visages of the drunken grooms. It must have been the Scottish queen's *companion* who watched with the truckling physician, and played the spy upon her mistress's remorseful wanderings, and told how it was the conscience-stricken lady's habit to do thus and thus; no one but a genteel mercenary would have been so sleepless in the dead hours of the night, lying in wait for the revelation of horrible secrets, the muttered clues to deadly mysteries.

"Thank God, she's gone at last!" cried John Mellish, as the door closed very softly and very slowly upon Mrs. Powell. "I hate that woman, Lolly."

Heaven knows I have never called John Mellish a hero; I have never set him up as a model of manly perfection or infallible virtue; and if he is not faultless, if he has those flaws and blemishes which seem a constituent part of our imperfect clay, I make no apology for him; but trust him to the tender mercies of those who, not being *quite* perfect themselves, will, I am sure, be

merciful to him. He hated those who hated his wife, or did her any wrong, however small. He loved those who loved her. In the great power of his wide affection, all self-esteem was annihilated. To love her was to love him; to serve her was to do him treble service; to praise her was to make him vainer than the vainest school-girl. He freely took upon his shoulders every debt that she owed, whether of love or of hate; and he was ready to pay either species of account to the uttermost farthing, and with no mean interest upon the sum total. "I hate that woman, Lolly,' he repeated; "and I sha'n't be able to stand her much longer."

Aurora did not answer him. She was silent for some moments, and when she did speak, it was evident that Mrs. Powell was very far away from her thoughts.

"My poor John!" she said, in a low soft voice, whose melancholy tenderness went straight to her husband's heart; "my dear, how happy we were together for a little time! How very happy we were, my poor boy!"

"Always, Lolly," he answered,—"always, my darling."

"No, no, no!" said Aurora suddenly; "only for a little while. What a horrible fatality has pursued us! what a frightful curse has clung to me! The curse of disobedience, John; the curse of Heaven upon my disobedience. To think that this man should have been sent here, and that he——"

She stopped, shivering violently, and clinging to the faithful breast that sheltered her.

John Mellish quietly led her to her dressing-room, and placed her in the care of her maid.

"Your mistress has been very much agitated by this night's business," he said to the girl; "keep her as quiet as you possibly can."

Mrs. Mellish's bedroom, a comfortable and roomy apartment, with a low ceiling and deep bay windows, opened into a morning-room, in which it was John's habit to read the newspapers and sporting periodicals, while his wife wrote letters, drew pencil sketches of dogs and horses, or played with her favourite Bow-wow. They had been very childish and idle and happy in this pretty chintz-hung chamber; and going into it to-night in utter desolation of heart, Mr. Mellish felt his sorrows all the more bitterly for the remembrance

of those bygone joys. The shaded lamp was lighted on the morocco-covered writing-table, and glimmered softly on the picture-frames, caressing the pretty modern paintings, the simple, domestic-story pictures which adorned the subdued gray walls. This wing of the old house had been refurnished for Aurora, and there was not a chair or a table in the room that had not been chosen by John Mellish with a special view to the comfort and the pleasure of his wife. The upholsterer had found him a liberal employer, the painter and the sculptor a noble patron. He had walked about the Royal Academy with a catalogue and a pencil in his hand, choosing all the "pretty" pictures for the ornamentation of his wife's rooms. A lady in a scarlet riding-habit and three-cornered beaver hat, a white pony, and a pack of greyhounds, a bit of stone terrace and sloping turf, a flower-bed, and a fountain, made poor John's idea of a pretty picture; and he had half a dozen variations of such familiar subjects in his spacious mansion. He sat down to-night, and looked hopelessly round the pleasant chamber, wondering whether Aurora and he would ever be happy again: wondering if this dark, mysteri-

ous, storm-threatening cloud would ever pass from the horizon of his life, and leave the future bright and clear.

"I have not been good enough," he thought; "I have intoxicated myself with my happiness, and have made no return for it. What am I that I should have won the woman I love for my wife, while other men are laying down the best desires of their hearts a willing sacrifice, and going out to fight the battle for their fellow-men? What an indolent good-for-nothing wretch I have been! How blind, how ungrateful, how undeserving!"

John Mellish buried his face in his broad hands, and repented of the carelessly happy life which he had led for one-and-thirty thoughtless years. He had been awakened from his unthinking bliss by a thunder-clap, that had shattered the fairy castle of his happiness, and laid it level with the ground; and in his simple faith he looked into his own life for the cause of the ruin which had overtaken him. Yes, it must be so; he had not deserved his happiness, he had not earned his good fortune. Have you ever thought of this, ye simple country squires, who give blankets and

beef to your poor neighbours in the cruel winter-time, who are good and gentle masters, faithful husbands, and tender fathers, and who lounge away your easy lives in the pleasant places of this beautiful earth? Have you ever thought that, when all our good deeds have been gathered together, and set in the balance, the sum of them will be very small when set against the benefits you have received? It will be a very small percentage which you will yield your Master for the ten talents intrusted to your care. Remember John Howard, fever-stricken and dying; Mrs. Fry labouring in criminal prisons; Florence Nightingale in the bare hospital chambers, in the close and noxious atmosphere, amongst the dead and the dying. These are the people who return cent. per cent. for the gifts intrusted to them. These are the saints whose good deeds shine amongst the stars for ever and ever; these are the indefatigable workers who, when the toil and turmoil of the day is done, hear the Master's voice in the still even-time; welcoming them to His rest.

John Mellish, looking back at his life, humbly acknowledged that it had been a comparatively

useless one. He had distributed happiness to the people who had come into his way; but he had never gone out of his way to make people happy. I dare say that Dives was a liberal master to his own servants, although he did not trouble himself to look after the beggar who sat at his gates. The Israelite who sought instruction from the lips of inspiration was willing to do his duty to his neighbour, but had yet to learn the broad signification of that familiar epithet; and poor John, like the rich young man, was ready to serve his Master faithfully, but had yet to learn the manner of his service.

"If I could save *her* from the shadow of sorrow or disgrace, I would start to-morrow barefoot on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem," he thought. "What is there that I would not do for her? what sacrifice would seem too great? what burden too heavy to bear?"

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